

The Stranger by candlewriter

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Summary: "Nothing exciting happens in Hawkins." When Aubrey's rebellious and self destructive habits threaten to break her Mother and Step-Father's perfect family picture in the UK, she's shipped off to Hawkins, Indiana to live with her father, Bob Newby. season one- chapter 1-? season two- chapter ?-? season three- chapter ?-?

1. Prologue

If someone had told me a year ago that I would break up with my boyfriend, lose all my friends, stop going to school, and eventually be shipped off to live with my dad in America, I would have laughed in their face and returned to finding ways to further shorten the skirt on my school uniform without my teachers realising.

The start of my downfall was breaking up with Joshua. We were each respectively Head Boy and Head Girl, we basically controlled the school, we were unstoppable together. People spoke about us as though we were one person, we were the couple everyone wanted to be and our lives were laid out in front of us. He would take over his father's accounting business, and I would be his trophy wife.

My breaking point with him was when I cut my hair. For as long as anyone could remember I had curly, dark brown hair that reached my waist. I craved change though and one day I went to my hairdresser and told her to do what she wanted with it, I trusted her to do something that would suit me. I walked out that day with shoulder length, flat ironed hair, with slightly lightened tips. Joshua had the audacity to tell me that I should have asked him before I changed my hair so drastically. I told him that he could go to my hairdresser and shove my cutoff hair up his ass if he cared about it that much, that way it could always be a part of him, unlike me. Admittedly it wasn't the best way to break up with someone but it got the job done.

Desperate to not be embarrassed by me, he took it upon himself to tell the school that he had broken up with me because I had slept with some boys from another school for money. Word started spreading that I was a slut, that I was just an 'easy lay'. My 'friends' stopped associating with me in fear they would be labelled as such too, and I was left alone. My grades started to slip as I skipped more and more classes and eventually I lost my title as Head Girl. The girl who I had once considered my closest friend, Rachel, was suddenly the new me. Head Girl, Joshua's girlfriend, top of the class, well liked, everything that I had essentially thrown away with the rest of my hair.

But I made new 'friends', most of them were 18/19, and I had just turned 16. They went out drinking every night and lived in a drug induced haze, so I joined them. We'd go around town breaking and entering into places we thought might be 'haunted' for thrills. Miraculously, I managed to avoid being arrested. For a while my mum and step-dad, Oliver, pretended I wasn't on a downward spiral. They ignored the fact that I would come home later and later each night, but when I didn't show up at all for a few nights, they decided they'd had enough. Everything they had previously swept under the carpet was dragged up onto the table. They also found out that I had stolen money, alcohol, and jewellery from my mother to pawn off for extra cash.

It was a Thursday night when I was called from my room to find my mother, Oliver, and my younger half brother Benjamin bunched together on the living room sofa.

"Enough is enough Aubrey." My mother sighed, motioning for me to sit down on the chair they'd pulled in from the dining room.

"What? I haven't left the house in days, what did I do this time?" I protested, sitting on the chair and kicking my legs up onto the coffee table.

"Exactly, you haven't been to school in two weeks." Oliver announced, as if I didn't already know what I had or hadn't done with my life. "Is this the example you want to set for Benjamin?"

There it was, the punchline in the joke that was my life. My mum and Oliver acted as though Benjamin was the prodigy child, they worshipped the ground he walked on. Everything he did was perfect, he was 6 years younger than me, yet I felt like I was the one desperately clinging at straws to live up to him. No matter what I achieved, precious little Benji had done better. We went on a weekend trip to France once, we got a boat over. When my mum remarried, she took Oliver's last name. So when we got on the boat, the woman working took a look at our passports to confirm we were who we claimed to be. Oliver Waters, Sylvia Waters, Benjamin Waters, and Aubrey Newby. She looked me up and down and asked "Is she a family friend?" and Oliver said "If only" in response. My own mother laughed as though it was the funniest joke anyone had ever

told. It truly solidified the feeling of not belonging in my own family.

"We've discussed things..." My mother began. "We think it would be best if you go to live with your father for the time being."

"WE?" I was enraged. "WE DISCUSSED IT? WHAT ABSOLUTE BOLLOCKS!" I was aware that if I continued at that volume the neighbours would have something to say, but apparently they wouldn't be my neighbours for much longer, so why should I care?

"Language!" My mum gasped, appalled by my behaviour.

"It's English, Sylvia!" I retorted, if I weren't so pissed off I would have given myself a pat on the back for that one.

"Excuse me, I am your mother and you will address me as such!" Her own voice was rising in volume, and it took every inch of self control I had left to not respond with 'You may be excused'.

"This is for the best, Aubrey." Oliver said sternly, taking over for my mother who was now evidently too angry to continue the conversation. "You will be leaving on Saturday. I suggest you pack your bags now."

"Your father has enrolled you into Hawkins High School, he'll be picking you up straight from the airport." My mother continued, having mildly calmed down. "We're doing what's best for you Aubrey."

"Whatever." I huffed pushing myself up from the chair and storming to my room to dig out my suitcase. As much as I hated the idea of leaving behind everything I knew to live with a man I haven't seen in years, it was a chance to get out of this house and away from everyone who has hurt me.

I had just finished packing all my clothes when there was a knock at my bedroom door.

"I'm not eating dinner tonight!" I called out, hoping whoever it was would leave.

"Um... That's not why I'm here..." Benjamin's soft voice called out from behind the door. I rolled my eyes and hopped over my suitcase

to open it.

"You here to check out your new trophy room now that I'm going to be gone?" I began to continue my angry ramblings until I saw the tears in his eyes. No matter what happened to drive us apart, he was still my little brother. "Hey, hey, it's okay." I whispered, pulling him into my room and then into a hug. I was instantly hit with a wave of regret at how I'd spoken to him, he's only 10 years old, he's still a child no matter how advanced he is at school.

"I'm sorry." He sobbed out, hugging me closer. "It's my fault you're leaving."

"No! No no no it's not!" I pulled away to look at his face and wipe his tears away. "It's not your fault at all. It's mine!"

"But... Dad said it was because you're a bad influence..." He sniffled, not wanting to meet my gaze.

"Love, it's not your fault that I'm leaving. I promise." I explained, sitting him down on the side of my bed, pushing some unpacked clothes out of the way to make room so I could sit next to him. "We all know I've done some pretty stupid things, and if I carry on like this it's only a matter of time before I get in lots of trouble for them... Maybe... Maybe it is for the best..."

"I don't want to lose my big sister..." Benjamin whispered, hugging me closer. My heart broke seeing him like this.

"You're not losing me, I'm just going to be on an adventure." I tried to explain to him. "It's like Doctor Who! The Doctor wouldn't get anything done if he just sat around all day, would he?" My brother slowly shook his head, a small smile forming on his face. "I'll write you letters and send you cool things I find on my adventures all the time, I promise... Now, wanna help me pack?"

"I can't believe you're going to America! That's so cool!" My friend Ava squealed before taking a drag of her cigarette.

"Your parents are shipping you halfway across the world because of your behaviour, that's so badass." Joshua agreed as he fumbled to

light his own cigarette. "I can't believe you're gonna be gone though Bree!"

"Eh you guys won't miss me much." I shrugged. "Keep smoking all that weed and you'll forget I even existed in a months time!" I chuckled, earning some laughs in response.

"America is so cool though, I'm jealous." Toby snickered, clutching the whiskey he had been drinking straight from the bottle for the past half hour.

"It's Indiana, not like... Las Vegas or New York or something." I pointed out. "I lived in Hawkins until I was 4 and I visited my dad every summer for a few years, and trust me..." I sighed deeply.

"Nothing exciting happens in Hawkins."

On the plane from the UK to Indiana, I found myself sat next to a mother named Janis and her baby Jodie, whom she proudly announce had turned 14 months old that day. About 2 hours into the flight Janis needed to use the loo, so she asked me to hold Jodie. Typically, Jodie immediately fell asleep in my arms and in a desperate attempt not to annoy the people on the plane with the sounds of a sleepy, grouchy, crying baby, she remained in my arms for the next few hours while she slept. Though I wasn't upset about this in the slightest. If I could achieve only one thing in life it would be to be a mother, which shocks most people when I tell them, as I don't come across as a mothering type to most. It's like I become a completely different person around kids.

Other than the impromptu babysitting session, the rest of the flight was mostly uneventful. We were fortunate enough to have no turbulence. Upon landing, I bid farewell to Janis and baby Jodie, the former of which had given me her number and address and told me she would happily set up a room for me, should I need it. It was sweet and I tucked the piece of paper into my back pocket.

After reclaiming my bag, I was struck by the fear that I wouldn't recognise my dad, Bob, or that he wouldn't recognise me. I scanned the crowd and in seconds our eyes met and I knew my fears had been irrational. I may not have seen him in years, but I still knew.

"Oh Aubrey! You've grown so much!" He cheered, tears in his eyes as he pulled me in for a hug which I only half reciprocated.

"Barely, I'm 16 and only just scratched 5'0." I scoffed, pulling my suitcases closer to me. "I haven't grown since I was 14."

"Yes, well I haven't seen you since you were 10." He pointed out. "Because someone decided they were too old to spend summers with their dad." I rolled my eyes at this.

"That wasn't the issue and you know that." I sighed. He hummed in response before changing his demeanor and grabbing one of my two suitcases for me.

"Let's get going! The sooner we leave, the sooner we get home! I can't wait for you to see your room." He cheered as I followed him through the airport.

When we got to the car, Bob loaded the cases into the trunk and squeezed it close. His Cambry was the ugliest colour I had ever seen, the only way I could describe it was 'baby poo brown'.

"What sort of music do you listen to nowadays?" He questioned, fiddling with the radio once we were in the car. I shrugged in response, looking out the window. He put on a random station with some semi-decent music.

Things were already so different in Indiana. It was slightly colder than it was in the UK, when I went to check the temperature I found it was in Fahrenheit, not Celcius. When I went to get in the car, I made my way to the front, left side, only to realise that it was the driver's seat. I also realised that I would probably be expected to learn how to drive. Whereas in the UK, you have to be 17 to start driving which for me was a good few months away. Would people make fun of me for not knowing how to drive? Oh god would I have to get a job so I can save up for a car?

My head started swimming with all these unanswered questions and I started to feel sick.

"Are you okay?" Bob asked, noticing my sudden change in demeanor.

I gently shook my head.

"Pull over please." He did as I asked by pulling over to the side of the road, I quickly jumped out and emptied my stomach on the side of the road. I had managed to keep my nerves at bay about moving to Indiana, I managed to pretend like it wasn't too big a deal, it was just something that was going to happen and I was going to let it happen. It wasn't until that moment when I truly realised how different everything would be from now on. My mum and Oliver hadn't told me how long they expected me to live with Bob for, it could be months, it could be indefinitely. I had both British and American Citizenship due to having been born in the USA but settling with family in the UK, but was I expected to live the rest of my life in America? I kicked myself for being too stubborn to properly talk things through before I was shipped off, but it wasn't like I was given much time.

When I was done I got back into the car and Bob offered me a mint to clear my breath.

"Still get travel sick, huh?" He joked, taking off again. I rested my head against the window and closed my eyes.

"Yeah... Something like that."

"You're kidding, right?" I questioned my father who wore a proud grin on his face. "Please tell me you're kidding."

"I kept it exactly how you left it last time!" He informed me. "Except the bed of course! I swapped out your old one for a queen sized one, figured I'd splash out a bit so you'd be comfortable." We were stood my childhood bedroom which was now I guess just my regular bedroom. Two walls were a baby pink and the other two were a hideous pus yellow, all of the walls had little hand-drawn sheep along the bottom. The hardwood floor had a tiny rug in the shape of a sheep just by the bed, and on said bed was another stuffed sheep.

"You're really not kidding..." I mumbled, dumping my suitcases in the room. "It's sweet but... I'm 16, not 6." Bob let out a small "oh" as he saw my point. I couldn't blame him, the last time we saw one another I was still a little girl and I guess that was what stuck in his

mind when he thought of me.

"Do you want me to take you to buy some more paint? Do a bit of redecorating?" He asked, I smiled and nodded. If this was going to be my new home, I might as well make it feel like a real home.

At the shop I picked up a lot of grey paint and a few smaller cans of different colours with the plan to spice one or two of the walls up a bit more. While we were checking out, I spotted a missing child poster on the window. *Will Byers*. Could that be my old friend Jonathan's brother? I used to play with Johnny when we were kids, we'd run around the forest bashing one another with sticks we pretended were swords. My mum went mad when I came home after one summer with 5 splinters in my ear, but I had fun at the time.

"Hey Bob, is that Byers as in Joyce and Jonathan?" I questioned, nudging him and motioning towards the poster.

"Yes, poor boy. Joyce is so lovely too, she doesn't deserve that." He sighed, shaking his head sadly. "You can call me dad, you know?"

"I know but..." I took a deep breath. "One step at a time, yeah? I need time to adjust and get back into the swing of Hawkins." He nodded slowly in understanding, trying to hide his disappointment. I felt guilty. I could tell that he was really trying, and I appreciated it, I truly did but... It was all just too much all at once. He sent me generic Christmas and birthday cards every year, but I hadn't actually seen or even gotten a 'hi, how are you?' letter in 6 years. I didn't understand why contact was so sparse with Bob when I was younger. I know now that it was my darling mother and Oliver's doing. They claimed that we were "too poor to 'waste' money on flights" to and from Indiana every year, despite the fact that Bob paid for half of the ticket and continued to send child support even for the month and a half I wasn't even there to be supported. He never once asked for anything in return for the new clothes, food, and toys he bought me and sent me home with when I was there. In all honesty, I think my mother resented the fun I had with him, I would kick and scream when it was time to come home, I'd try to fake illnesses so I wouldn't be able to get on the plane. It wasn't Bob's fault, yet he was the one who was punished for it by being cut off. It was my fault, I should have known.

"Did you find everything you need?" The cashier, a kind looking older man, questioned me, snapping me back into the present. I nodded and scrambled to find my purse, only for pound coins and notes to fall out. Bob put his hand on my arm to stop me digging further for the dollars I'd exchanged at the airport and placed his own money down. The cashier took the money and printed off the receipt, handing it to me. "It's good to have you home in Hawkins again Aubrey." He nodded with a smile, I furrowed my brow before Bob pushed me out of the shop.

"So I may have told some people about your arrival."

5 hours later and I was smothered in paint, but so were my walls. I had first coated them in the dark grey I had bought an abundance of before I got to work on my grand plan. On one wall I had painted a giant dragon, which was breathing fire. The fire spread in bursts across the walls and on the ceiling, which I managed to reach by standing on my cabinets.

"I'm heading off to bed now, I have work in the morning." Bob informed me as he walked in, his eyes widening once he saw what I'd done to the walls. "Wow, that's impressive! I might have to get you to paint the rest of the house!"

"Yeah, I'm thinking Unicorns in the living room and trolls in the bathroom!" I played along with him, both of us laughing at the thought of turning the place into a fantasy funhouse. "Speaking of the living room, I'm probably going to sleep on the sofa in there, I think I've inhaled enough paint fumes for today."

"That's fine, just remember you're diving right into the deep end tomorrow- it's going to be your first day at Hawkins High School." I waved him off and told him I would make sure I get plenty of sleep. He walked off mumbling about how crazy it was that I'm in high school already.

Once I was in my pyjamas and curled up with my duvet on the sofa I flicked through the TV channels, expecting to find reruns of Doctor Who on the BBC, only to remember that I was in America now and I probably wouldn't be able to access the *British* Broadcasting Corporation as easily here. In the end I settled for sticking on some

American sitcom as background noise while I fell asleep.

"Aubrey! Time to wake up now!" I heard as someone shook me awake.

"Five more minutes." I complained while rolling over, only to fall flat on the floor. Well that was one way to wake me up. When I opened my eyes, it took me a moment to remember where I was.

"Finally! I've been trying to get you up for 30 minutes now! You sleep like the dead!" Bob chuckled slightly. "I'm leaving in 20 minutes and I assume you're going to need a lift to school so you're going to have to get ready quickly."

"Yeah about that... I was thinking that maybe I could start next week?" I mumbled, Bob stopped to stare at me while he was halfway through taking a bite of his toast.

"Hawkins High School is expecting you today and you will be there today." He told me firmly, I rolled my eyes.

"But I need time to-" I tried to protest but he cut me off.

"But nothing young lady! You are going to school and that is final!"

"Bloody hell! Fine!" I groaned, my hands up in the air in surrender.

"But I promise you I will hate every second of it!"

2. Chapter 1

"So do I get my uniform when I get there or what?" I asked Bob as I clambered into the passenger seat.

"Uniform?" He questioned, starting the car. "What uniform?"

"You know... My school uniform?" I snorted, going to kick my legs up onto the dashboard only for him to knock them down again.

"Hawkins High School doesn't have a uniform." He explained. "Do British schools have uniforms then?"

"Yeah it's pretty standard in almost all of the schools back home." I shut my eyes as I realised I had called the UK home. It wasn't home for me anymore, mum and Oliver had made that clear when they shipped me off to Indiana. "Well I'm going to need to get more clothes, I didn't get the chance to pack my entire wardrobe. I used to wear a uniform 5 out of seven days of the week, so I didn't have much variety to begin with anyway. I can maybe squeeze one and a half weeks of outfits out of my clothes but I don't want people to think I'm skanky or something."

"Tell you what, if you manage to make even one friend today- I'll give you some money to buy a whole new wardrobe." Bob bargained as we pulled up to what I assumed was Hawkins High School. It wasn't too far so I wouldn't have issues walking once I knew the way.

"It'll be tough but I'll try." I laughed, opening the door and exiting the car.

"Love you kiddo! Good luck!" He called out just before I closed the door.

"You too Bob." I sighed, clutching my backpack as he sped off. I peered up at Hawkins High School and I was immediately filled with a sense of dread. I felt like I'd just stepped into a stereotypical American sitcom and I was 'the new girl'. Taking a deep breath, I started to make my way into the school, not knowing where I was going or what I should be doing.

"Aubrey Newby, right?" A cheery girl bounded up to me. Her blonde ponytail was so tight it looked like it would rip her face off if tugged on. She answered her own question before I got the chance to. "Of course you are! I know *everyone* in this school and it's not often we get new kids! I'm Angela but you can call me Angie!"

"I assume you're the welcome wagon?" I asked, though I already knew the answer. Judging by her preppy look and attitude, she wouldn't have touched me with a stick unless she had to. I wasn't exactly the most approachable person in the world.

"Oh my god! Your accent is so precious! Guys you have to hear this!" She gasped while waving over the two girls she had previously been standing with. "Say something again!"

"Umm... Something... again?" I stuttered out, my mind drawing on a blank when it came to saying something meaningful or well thought out.

"You're like, so funny!" One of the girls giggled, her voice was sickeningly sweet and lacked any sincerity.

"Look, can we just get this over with? I'm not some performing circus monkey and if you keep gawking whenever I say something I'll start charging per word." I huffed with an eye roll for added attitude. In perfect sync, their brainless smiles turned to scowls.

"No need to be such a bitch about it." Angie hissed, shoving a stack of paper in my arms. "That's your schedule, locker number, code, and a map. I was kind enough to cross your classrooms off with an X so you can find them easier. You're welcome." Without giving me a chance to respond or ask any more questions she stalked off, the two girls following her.

"I thought British people we're supposed to be nice?" I overheard one of the two asking.

"No that's Canadians." The sickeningly sweet one responded. With that they turned a corner and were out of my sight.

Thankfully, my locker was fairly close by and easy to locate. I opened

it to find a stack of textbooks inside, so I plucked out the ones that I needed up until lunch according to my schedule. When I closed my locker I turned around to lean against it, yawning fairly loudly. My tiredness was probably a mixture of jet lag and the fact that I struggled to sleep on the couch. Too many new smells for me to concentrate. I looked down at my watch, confused when it read 4:30. I soon realised I hadn't changed the time yet, and looked around the hallway for a clock as a reference. I knew Indiana was 5 hours behind the UK, but I wanted to double check so I wouldn't fuck up my schedule completely.

As I peered around I spotted an unmistakably recognisable teen boy pinning up MISSING posters. I debated approaching him or not, and in that time he looked up and our eyes met. A small smile of recognition spread across his face.

"The cat had a hard time dragging me in, but here I am!" I grinned, walking up to him. "One person goes missing, and another appears... Wow that was wildly inappropriate of me, sorry!" I winced, realising what I had just said and who I had said it to.

"You haven't changed a bit Bree." He laughed ever so slightly, though it didn't do much to mask his sadness. I pulled him into a quick hug which he hesitantly returned. "I heard whispers of a new student but I didn't expect it to be you."

"Yeah, my mum got sick of my shit and decided I was gonna be Bob's problem from now on." I loosely explained. We went silent for a second before I gestured at the posters in his arms. "You need some help today? I can just say I got hopelessly lost on my way to my first class?"

"It's okay, thank you though." He sighed, clutching the posters closer. "I'm going to my dad's next so..."

"Urgh Lonnie." I spat, remembering the older man bitterly. I remembered my last summer in Hawkins when Jonathan had been forced by his father to kill a bunny rabbit. I spent a full week hugging him whenever he'd burst into tears at the memory. "He and your mum finally called it quits then?" He nodded in response. "You sure you don't want me to come over there and beat him up?"

"As much as I would like to see someone kick the crap out of him, and I don't doubt that you could easily do it with your eyes closed, it's probably best if I go alone." He told me. "You should probably find your first class before the bell rings."

"You're right." I nodded, giving him one more hug. "When Will is found well and healthy, which he will be, we should hang out again." He smiled and agreed before we parted ways, pointing out his phone number was on the missing posters if I ever needed to call.

As I walked away, I saw another girl approach Jonathan with a determined look on her face, leaving behind a group of teens who were whispering and pointing at the scene unfolding. One of the males nudged his friends as I passed.

"Looks like freak managed to trick the new girl into feeling sorry for him." He jeered, earning what could only be described as an evil witch cackle from the girl who looked like she was growing out of his arm, and an eye roll from the other boy. "Or maybe she's a freak like him. Huh new girl?" I tried to tune it out, but he stepped in front of me. "It's rude to ignore someone when they're talking to you."

"It's also rude to call people names, yet here you are." I hissed in response. "Now why don't you get out of my way before I make you get out of my way?"

"What's your problem?" He scoffed, clearly not taking my threat seriously.

"Currently? You are." I answered pushing him out the way with some mild force. He was about to grab my shoulder when the other guy spoke up.

"Leave her Tommy." He told him. 'Tommy' scoffed again before making his way back to the girl, slinking his arm back around her waist.

Two arguments and I hadn't even had my first lesson. That's got to be some record.

I managed to avoid any confrontation during my classes, glaring at

teachers who looked like the 'why don't you stand in front of the class and introduce yourself!' type, thus avoiding the "I'm Aubrey, yes I'm new, yes I have a different accent to you all, no I'm not going to be your friend" speech I had prepared as a just in case.

Before I knew it, it was the end of the day and I joined the herd of students making their way out. I spotted the unmistakable baby poo brown car and made my way towards it.

"Hey kiddo! How was your first day?" Bob questioned as I threw my bag, now heavier with added textbooks and homework, into the back seat.

"Pretty standard first day, classes were pretty easy because I'd learnt a lot of what we were studying a few months ago." I explained, buckling my seatbelt in.

"Did you make any friends?" He then asked and I winced, realising I had probably made some enemies but no friends. "I'll take that face as a no. It's a shame, I'd gotten you a gift to say congratulations too."

"Wait no!" I gasped, not wanting to miss out on whatever the gift was. "I saw Jonathan Byers again! We hugged and everything! I even offered to beat Lonnie up for him! That's a friend, right?" Bob chuckled in response.

"You know what? I'll take it." He told me, reaching into the backseat to pull something out. "It's from work so I got a staff discount, I remembered how much you loved singing and dancing as a kid but I didn't see anything like this with your stuff." He handed me a box containing a record player and I was almost reduced to tears. "Do... Do you not like it?" He asked, concerned.

"I love it." I smiled, clutching the box close. "I wasn't allowed anything like this in the UK, I was told the noise would disrupt Benji's studies."

"I didn't want to risk getting you any records you might not like, so I figured if you told me the names of 3 I could grab them for you tomorrow?" He offered with a grin, clearly proud that he'd done something right.

"Thank you." I grinned back as he started the car again so we could go home.

Setting up the record player was easier than I'd expected, Bob had done most of the work for me, after all it was part of his job to help others with things like this. The paint on my walls had dried and after a couple of hours with the windows open, the smell had dulled down almost entirely. It was almost 9pm by the time I was fully unpacked and I flopped myself onto the bed.

"It's getting late, what do you want for dinner?" Bob asked, popping his head in.

"Chinese?" I asked hopefully, I had my regular order for the local Chinese in the UK, but it would take a few tries to figure out what I liked here.

"Fine, but this won't become a habit! Just a 'Welcome to Hawkins'." He said sternly, pointing his finger as if it would solidify his words.

"That's a lie and you know it, it'll be a weekly thing by next month!" I laughed, he quickly joined in, the stern facade fading as fast as it had appeared.

"It looks really good in here kiddo." He told me once we'd calmed down. "I'll have to get you to redecorate the rest of the house at this rate."

"I was thinking Unicorns in the living room and Trolls in the bathroom!" I smirked, he laughed again as he started to make his way out of my room. "Wait!" I called out, hopping off of my bed and grabbing a slip of paper from my nightstand. "Record requests." I explained, handing it over to Bob. I'd managed to narrow down 3 that I'd wanted for a long time, having heard a lot of the songs on them on the radio and when I went to parties with my 'friends'.

Billy Joel's "The Stranger"

Fleetwood Mac's "Rumours"

David Bowie's "Heroes"

"Good choices." Bob nodded with a smile as he read the paper.
"Consider it done."

Maybe, just maybe, living in Hawkins wouldn't be terrible.

When it came to lunch the next day, I got there early and picked a table. I sent glares at people who dared to approach me. Bob had packed me lunch that consisted of a ham and cheese sandwich, and a packet of crisps called "Lays". The 'cheese' was orange and looked like plastic so I quickly discarded it. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw someone approach me and prepared myself for a glare.

"Aubrey, right?" The girl sat down and I realised it was the same one who had approached Jonathan earlier that day. "I'm Nancy."

"You know, I will never get used to you guys pronouncing my name like that." I smirked as she sat down opposite me. "Awh-bree" I attempted in my best American accent. "Reminds me of my childhood, I lost my accent pretty quickly when I moved, my mum hated that she was looked at strangely so she would force us to put on British accents until they eventually stuck."

"How do you say it?" Nancy questioned, I could tell that she was genuinely interested.

"Orh-bree. With more of an 'or' rather than an 'aw'." I explained, taking a bite of my sandwich. "I assume you're not here to discuss pronunciation with me. What do you want?" She seemed quite taken aback by my brash tone.

"I can't find my friend today, and none of my other friends seem to care. I was wondering if you'd maybe seen her in one of your classes." She explained. "Her name is Barb, she's got short red hair, freckles, and wears glasses." I tried to think back, I hadn't paid much attention to my fellow students but I couldn't recall seeing her... Although...

"When the teacher read out names in Maths- sorry, Math- he called out 'Barbra' but no one answered. I'm sorry I don't know more than that." I shot her a small, sad smile. She seemed to care about her friend, that and the fact that she appeared to have been nice to Jonathan this morning while ignoring the assholes making fun of

him, I decided she wasn't too bad.

"I see... Thanks anyway." Nancy sighed, making a move to stand up again.

"Hey!" I called just as she was about to walk away. "I'll tell you what, I'll help you look for her if you take me to the mall at some point." I offered, she smiled and nodded. We planned to meet in front of the school at the end of the day. I highly doubted Bob would know what sort of shops had the best clothing and deals for a teenage girl, that and I intended on purchasing some party clothes that I highly doubt he'd approve of. Nancy seemed like a nice girl who wasn't too quick to judge and would go along with things without too much protest, so she would be a safe person to go shopping with.

Once I'd finished my food, which didn't take long, I made my way to the closest phone that I knew of. Bob had given me the number of his work just in case.

"Hello, Radioshack, Bob speaking. How can I help?" Perfect, I wouldn't have to deal with talking to someone else first. I hated phone calls where I had to wait while whoever answered went to fetch the person I'd asked to speak to.

"Hey! Bob!" I responded.

"Aubrey? Is everything okay? Are you okay? Do you need me to pick you up?"

"Everything is fine, don't worry! I actually called to say that you don't need to pick me up today, I'm going to hang out with someone after school for a bit."

"You made a friend? Who is it?"

"Nancy, I didn't catch her last name but it's a small town so-

"Wheeler! Good family, good choice." He told me, cutting me off. I figured since it was a small town he would probably know someone just by their first name.

"Great! So yeah you don't need to pick me up, I'll either get a lift from

someone or I'll call you from wherever I am and see if you can get me later."

"Sounds like a plan! I gotta get back to work though, see you later kiddo! Stay safe and make good choices!"

"I will, promise!" With that he had hung up. It was perfect timing as the bell rang, signalling that we had 5 minutes to get to our next class. I grabbed the books I'd need from my locker and made my way to my next lesson.

At the end of the day I met Nancy outside the school as we'd planned. She waved me over to the phone she stood by.

"I'm going to call Barb's parents, double check that she hasn't just stayed home today." She explained and I nodded.

"Sounds like a good plan, the best place to look for someone is normally their own home." I smirked, leaning against the wall as she called the number from memory.

"Hi, uh, Ms. Holland, it's Nancy... I'm good." She said, I couldn't hear what 'Ms. Holland' was saying in response so I leaned in a little closer until I could just about make it out. "Um, I was just wondering, uh, is Barb there?"

"Mmm No, she hasn't come home yet." Ms. Holland answered.

"But she did come home, right? After the vigil?"

"No, she said she was staying with you last night."

"Right, yes. She did, sorry." I rolled my eyes as Nancy stuttered her way through the rest of the conversation. "I meant, did she come home this morning? I think she left some textbooks and she was gonna go pick them up."

"Oh, um, no, I haven't seen her." Nancy widened her eyes and looked at me for help, but I didn't know what to say.

"Do- Do you know what? I just remembered she's at the library!" She ended up telling Ms Holland, who didn't seem to believe her.

"Nancy, will you please have her call me as soon as you find her?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I will. Sorry to bother you." With that, Nancy hung up and took a deep breath.

"You're a terrible liar, I'll have to give you some lessons one day." I nudged, trying to lighten her mood slightly. This was the second person I know of to go missing in Hawkins.

"Yeah, are you much better?" She responded, smiling ever so slightly.

"I once managed to convince my Science teacher to give me an A on a project I didn't even do." I told her proudly.

"How did you manage to do that?" She asked, eyes wide.

"I just told her that I'd left it on her desk and gave her a rough explanation of what the project was, she was convinced that she'd lost it herself and felt bad so she gave me an A." I explained, recalling the incident.

"Wow, that's pretty-" She began, but seemed to have gotten distracted by something. "Hold on..." I glanced over to where she was looking to find the group of assholes confronting Jonathan. There was an added redheaded girl with them, and for a moment I thought it might have been Barb, but then I remembered Nancy said she had short hair and while Nancy had some sort of reaction to what was going on, it wasn't the 'holy shit I thought you were dead!' reaction you'd have when you found a missing friend.

"Hey, man." One said, getting off of the car which I could only assume was Jonathan. It looked like they had been waiting for him.

"What's going on?" He was clearly scared of what was about to happen.

"Nicole here was, uh, telling us about your work." The boy who appeared to be the ringleader said. I could tell that his hair was bigger than his ego, and that was saying something.

"We've heard great things." The girl from the hallway yesterday piped up, I hated everything about her already, I dubbed her 'Bitch'.

"Yeah, sounds cool." The boy who seemed to be attached to her 24/7 spoke, I dubbed him 'Bitch's bitch boy'

"And we'd just love to take a look. You know, as connoisseurs of art." Hair boy said, taking steps towards Jonathan. We could only just about hear what they were saying, or at least I could. I wasn't sure how much Nancy was picking up on. She hadn't yet made a move towards them so I stayed with my feet planted by her side, even if I wanted to storm over there and break all of their necks.

"I don't know what you're talking about." Jonathan managed to stammer out, trying to take a step back. Bitch's bitch boy grabbed his bag before he could move and I clenched my fists, Nancy still hadn't moved and if she didn't soon, I would. "Hey. Please, give me my bag."

"Man, he is totally trembling. He must really have something to hide." Big hair taunted as Bitch's bitch boy threw Jonathan's bag at him. He automatically started to go through it and Nancy finally began making her way towards the group, I pushed myself off the wall and joined her. "Here we go. Ah Here we go. Oh, man."

Bitch's bitch boy and Bitch herself began grabbing the pictures Big hair had pulled out of the bag.

"I was looking for my brother." Jonathan tried to explain as they rifled through the images.

"No. No, this is called stalking." Big hair said as Nancy and I got there.

"What's going on?" Nancy asked, I stood slightly behind her, deciding not to talk because I knew I'd end up causing a physical fight.

"Here's the starring lady... and... that one." Bitch's bitch boy's smirk turned into a frown when he saw me behind Nancy, I rolled my eyes at him, continuing to keep my mouth shut.

"What?" Nancy asked, confused by the scene unfolding before us.

"This creep was spying on us last night. He was probably gonna save this one for later." Bitch handed Nancy a picture, I peered over her shoulder out of curiosity but quickly looked away when I realised

what it was.

"See, you can tell that he knows it was wrong, but Man, that's the thing about perverts It's hardwired into 'em. You know, they just can't help themselves." Big hair said bitterly, ripping up pictures as Bitch's bitch boy laughed. "So we'll just have to take away his toy."

"Steve." Nancy said to big hair, I assumed that was his name, it was either that or some weird safe word.

"No, please, not the camera." Jonathan pleaded, had he actually taken those pictures, that was wrong- but breaking his camera wasn't the right way to go about the situation.

"No, no, wait, wait Tommy, Tommy. It's okay. Here you go, man." Steve held out Jonathan's camera to him, and for a second I thought that maybe he wasn't so bad. Then he dropped it. I watched Jonathan's face fall, he had clearly had the same train of thought.

The group of assholes started to walk off, ripping pictures and dropping them as they went. Nancy bent over to pick up and study one of the images, but she was called by the group of assholes.

"Aubrey I-" She began, shoving the pieces of torn image into her pocket.

"It's okay, go with them. I'll stick around here for a bit." I told her with a small smile, she nodded and walked off with the group. She hadn't done anything wrong here, I couldn't fault her for it. Jonathan however. "Dude! It's one thing to TAKE the pictures but to develop them too?! At school?!" He looked down at his feet as I berated him.

"I know I just..." He trailed off, not having much of an argument. I sighed and picked up his broken camera.

"What you did was wrong, but what they did was also wrong." I handed it over to him. "Take this as a lesson though, it's not worth it to mess around with people like that. They're full of teen angst bullshit and they'll pick on whoever they think will work as a stepladder to get up the social food chain." He nodded in understanding as he put his camera and bag and the scraps of photos

he'd salvaged from the wind into his car.

"Do you... Need a ride home?" He asked, looking around and not seeing Bob's car anywhere. I shook my head.

"Thanks but no thanks, I think I'll hang around here for a while and then maybe walk home." I told him.

I waved as he drove off. A sudden strong breeze swept my short hair around and into my face, I shivered and clutched my leather jacket closer. Regret washed over me as the wind continued to pick up, I should have accepted the ride. It was growing increasingly clearer that Nancy wasn't going to come back. Just as I started to walk away from the school I heard her call my name. I turned around and gave her a small smile.

"I was worried that you might have left already, I'm glad you didn't." She told me as she caught up.

"You're lucky I have nothing better to do and no friends." I joked, she looked mildly pleased at this.

"Well I'll be your friend." She told me, and I believed her whole heartedly.

Nancy and I walked down the road she told me would take us to where she last saw Barb. Along the way she froze at the sight of a car parked on the side of the road.

"Is it hers?" I asked, though from the look on her face I didn't need an answer. We made our way towards the car, Nancy looked inside for any sign that maybe the girl had slept inside it overnight, but apparently it looked untouched. We began calling out Barb's name, just in case she was somewhere nearby, hurt and unable to walk. Though there was no response.

After 10 minutes we continued to what I learnt was Steve's house, apparently there had been a lowkey party with Steve, and the bitch couple, whose names I learnt were Tommy and Carol. Nancy had dragged Barb along as some sort of safety net, she cut her hand. They had a small argument and Nancy had told Barb she'd get a ride home

later. That was the last she'd seen of the missing girl.

We got to Steve's house and Nancy let herself in through the open gate, reassuring me that his parents were away so they wouldn't be caught trespassing.

"Barb was here, look." She pulled out a part one of Jonathan's pictures. It showed Barb on the side of the pool. Just as she showed me, we heard a rustling from the forest next to the house. Our eyes met and we nodded.. Every inch of my body was telling me to run away, but I put on a brave face and followed Nancy towards the noise.

The noises got louder the further in we got, and we drew closer together for protection. In a split second, *something* sped in front of us. I say something because I had no idea what it was, it was like nothing I had seen before, and it moved faster than any animal I knew of.

We both turned and ran, but Nancy tripped. Without thinking of my own safety, I grabbed her hand and pulled her up, our hands stayed connected as we ran.

It wasn't until we reached a residential area that we let go of our death grips on one another. We stood in the middle of the street, catching our breath. In a split second Nancy started sobbing, I wasn't sure how to react so I just pulled her into a hug as she cried onto my shoulder.

This was definitely not how I expected to spend my Tuesday afternoon.

3. Chapter 2

sometimes my own stupidity astounds me- for this chapter I googled "are there post boxes in America?" like how else would y'all send letters? I have one brain cell and she's called Jennyfer (with a Y because she's that bitch) and she took a raincheck this entire chapter

Nancy and I walked together back to her house, she didn't want to be alone and after what we saw, neither did I. Though I doubted that we could have taken on whatever that was with even the two of us working together. We walked together in silence, neither of us knowing what to make of the events that had just proceeded.

We eventually reached her house.

"Hey! You're home early! How was the game?" A woman who I could only assume was Nancy's mum, asked. "Nancy? What's the matter?" She questioned, turning to look at us.

"It's Barb." Nancy eventually stammered while crying. "I think something happened. Something terrible."

I didn't stay much longer than that, I used their landline to call Bob to come pick me up. I could sense Nancy needed to be alone to think for a while, and I was at ease knowing she was safe in her house and surrounded by family. When Bob arrived I got into the car without saying anything to him. After a minute or two he finally spoke up.

"So, did you have fun with your new friend?" He asked, I could tell he was just trying to fill the silence.

"Yeah sure, something like that." I sighed, slouching into the car seat and wishing it would just swallow me whole. I had been back in Hawkins for less than 3 days and I was already somehow involved in a missing persons case.

When we got home, Bob decided to cheer me up by showing me the records he'd got me. It was an instant mood lifter. When I got to my room I started playing Billy Joel's record, The Stranger. Back when I

was with Joshua I used to borrow his Walkman, and I bought myself The Stranger on cassette as he was never a fan of Billy Joel so he didn't have it himself. I'd listen to it on a bad day and it would automatically cheer me up, it was like a safety blanket. Vienna was my favourite song from the entire album.

"You know if you were a boy, you would have been called Joel, and our dog at the time was called Billy. Happy little coincidence." Bob laughed as he stood in my doorway. "Anyway, I came in here to ask you what you wanted for dinner, we don't have much I need to go shopping tomorrow."

"You got stuff for chilli?" I asked, he nodded and disappeared to the kitchen.

I soon realised I hadn't written a letter to Benjamin yet like I'd promised him I would, so I pulled out my pen and paper and got to work.

Hey squirt,

I know, I'm sorry it's later than I promised it would be- BUT in my defence I am very jet-lagged and a lot has happened. I actually made a friend! Shocking, I know! Long story short, her friend has gone missing and we saw this 'thing' in the forest. This shit looked like it came straight out of Dr Who it was freaky!

I hope you're holding up okay without me

Flip mum + Oliver off for me please!

-Love Aubrey xxx

"Dinner is ready!" Bob called from the kitchen/dining room. I got up, folding the letter.

"Smells lush!" I grinned, watching him spoon chilli into bowls for us. "Have you got envelopes and stamps anywhere?"

"Got a letter to send?" He enquired as we settled down at the table to eat.

"Yeah, to Benjamin. I promised I'd send one as soon as I got here but I

got a bit caught up." I explained.

"We'll send it first class then!" Bob smiled, taking a sip of water. "Is Benjamin your brother?"

"Yeah, he's a little brat but I love him. Smartest kid I know, not that I'm friends with many kids." I snorted fairly ungracefully.

"Well he may not be my son but he's still family, he's always welcome to stay here if he visits." He told me with sincerity.

"I- Thank you." I smiled, I doubted Oliver would ever let Benjamin come and visit but it was a nice thought nonetheless.

'Had to pop off to work early, sorry! Lunch money is on the counter! Will also be leaving late so can't pick you up today' Read the note on the dining table. It was fortunate that I had actually woken up to my alarm this morning, unlike the past few days when Bob had to come and almost physically drag me out of bed. I could sleep through a tsunami normally, but that thing Nancy and I saw yesterday plagued my nightmares so sleep was sparse.

I dreaded walking alone to school, it was only a 10 minute walk maximum, even for my little stubby legs. But still, knowing that thing was out there somewhere I didn't even want to check the mailbox outside alone. Still, I put on a brave face, grabbed the lunch money and letter, and set off. There was a mailbox just outside the school and with first class shipping it shouldn't take more than 2 weeks. I wondered if he'd maybe sent me a letter already and it was awaiting delivery, but I soon decided that Oliver and mum would have never voluntarily given him my new address, hence why I wrote it on the back of the letter I sent.

Christmas was drawing closer and I was tempted to ask for a polaroid camera, or at least money towards getting one myself. Maybe I could pick up a job at the local mall as an elf to make up the rest of the money? God knows I'm short enough. With a polaroid camera I could send pictures to Benjamin of my antics in Hawkins, he'd probably get a kick out of it all.

It wasn't long before I arrived at school, I was a little out of breath as

I'm not in the best of shape, and I had decided to jog part of the way, particularly when the path edged near the trees where something could be lurking.

I spotted Nancy outside the school building, and when she spotted me she practically ran up to me and pulled me into a hug. I had done more hugging since being in Hawkins than I would have normally done in half a year back in the UK. I wasn't opposed to it though.

"I was so worried when I didn't see your dad's car anywhere and the bell rung 5 minutes ago!" She gasped, hugging me again. "I thought it got to you and I had lost you too." I held her as she lightly sobbed gently hushing her and glaring at everyone who gave us an odd look.

"It's okay, I'm okay, I'm here." I told her, and eventually she calmed down.

"I need to go to the cops about all of this." She eventually admitted, I nodded.

"I agree, and I'll be here for you, okay?" She sent me a sad, watery eyed smile. "Now, you said the bell had rung?"

We agreed to meet up again at lunchtime, we had very few classes together and sadly none of those were that morning. Nancy planned to talk to Steve first and then call the police. She wanted me there so I could back up the claims of what we saw in the woods by Steve's house and of course, I complied.

So that's where we were, in the alleyway down the side of the school.

"So, wait a sec. I don't understand. You went back to my house?" Steve asked, and I wanted nothing more than to slap him. It had been a minute and I was already sick of him.

"To look for Barb." Nancy explained, she was desperate for him to understand what was happening, but apparently his hair had grown into his brain and mashed it up a bit because the information was just not processing how it should.

"Yeah, okay, but why didn't you just talk to me? That's crazy." I rolled my eyes as I leant against the wall, causing him to send a glare in my

direction.

"I don't know, I- I was scared." Nancy responded.

"But you decided you'd take the new girl who you don't even know? She could be a serial killer for all you know Nance!" Steve said, pointing at me. "Isn't it a bit too convenient that she shows up just as people start going missing?"

"I have a name *and* I can hear you." I finally spoke up, flipping the boy off which he returned. "If I were to make anyone go missing you'd be top of my list, buddy."

"Whatever, *buddy*." He huffed before turning back to Nancy. "You seriously think you saw a guy in a mask just hanging out in my yard?"

"I don't think it was a mask." Nancy sighed.

"But he had no face?" Steve asked, clearly not believing any of this.

"I don't know!" She protested, raising her voice ever so slightly.

"I saw it too." I pointed out, Nancy gave me a small, thankful smile. Relieved she had at least one person to back her up and make her sound less crazy.

"Are you sure new girl didn't drug you?" I truly wanted to punch Steve.

"Aubrey did not drug me!" She protested, I rolled my eyes once again.

"If I had access to drugs like that do you really think I'd be in an alleyway talking to you?" I pointed out. "There are so many places I'd rather be right now."

"I just... I have a terrible feeling about this." Nancy sighed, dispelling the rising tension between Steve and I.

"Oh, this is bad." Steve said, leaning against the opposite wall. "This is really bad."

"What?" Nancy asked, confused at his sudden change in demeanour.

"You finally realising you're being a dick and someone is literally missing?" I questioned, narrowing my eyes. He just ignored me.

"The cops they're gonna want to talk to all of us now. Tommy, Carol, everybody who was at the party." I was in shock at how self centred this boy was.

"So?" Nancy questioned, not quite understanding the issue.

"My parents are gonna murder me!" Steve complained, if I were to roll my eyes any more they would probably have gone into the back of my head.

"Are you serious right now?" Nancy demanded, just by looking at his face, I could tell he was 100% serious. He was so far up his own arse that I couldn't tell where which part began and the other ended.

"You don't understand. My dad's a grade A asshole." He protested, as if that would make any difference.

"Barb is missing! And you're worried about your dad?" Nancy was rightly outraged.

"Yes, lets all put on hold the fact that a human being is upset because you're worried your parents are going to be upset that you had a party!" I was almost shouting at this point. "Newsflash idiot, if your parents are going to be that pissed that you had some friends over, maybe don't fucking do it in the first place? Especially if you're not willing to own up to it when someone's life is potentially at stake!" I was aware the pair were staring at my outburst, Steve in shock and Nancy in almost admiration.

"Okay, just When you talk to the cops, just don't mention the beers. It's just gonna get us both in trouble, and Barbara's got nothing to do with it, okay?" Steve managed to eventually stutter out after my minor outburst.

"I can't believe you right now!" Nancy huffed, beginning to walk away. "I can't believe you." Steve called after her but she didn't respond. Before I left to catch up with her I turned to him, giving him the signature scowl I had become known for back in the UK.

"You know, maybe you should talk to your dad more? You seem like a pretty grade A asshole too. You might have something in common." I spat out and finally jogged away to catch up with Nancy. "I really don't like your boyfriend." I told her once I was at her side.

"Yeah, right now neither do I." She sighed, looping her arm around mine.

"You still going to talk to the police?" I asked once we had finally stopped and sat down on a bench.

"I have to. I think something terrible has happened to Barb and I can't just sit by while I know she's missing and know where she was last seen." She said, her head in her hands. "Screw Steve."

"Nancy Wheeler? If you'll come with me, please?" I got up to join Nancy but I was stopped. "Just Ms. Wheeler. We don't need to talk to you Ms. Newby." I sent Nancy an apologetic look and mouthed 'call me'. She nodded and after that she was out of sight.

"Hey kiddo! You're home later than I thought you'd be!" Bob smiled from the sofa when I entered the house. "I thought you might have gone missing!" He joked. I sighed, I wanted to tell him that now was not the time for jokes like that, but I knew he didn't mean anything bad by it.

"I'm not hungry tonight so I won't have any dinner." I told him, he frowned and tilted my head.

"Are you feeling okay?" He asked, I nodded and forced a smile.

"Yeah, just not hungry that's all." I said, making my way to my room.

"You can talk to me about anything." He reminded me, I nodded again and mumbled a 'thanks' before closing the door and leaning against it.

It was almost 2 hours later when Bob called my name and told me I had a call. I picked it up from the phone in my room, thankful that he wouldn't have to listen in to my conversation.

Nancy explained over the phone what had happened when she was

interviewed.

"Her car is gone! They think she skipped town but they don't know Barb, she wouldn't do that. She would never just leave." Nancy informed me. "I know it's a lot to ask but... Do you think you could come over? I just... I don't have anyone else I can talk to about this."

"Of course, I'll ask Bob if he can drop me off." I told her and then confirmed the address.

"Hey Bobby!" I cheered as I exited my room, his face deadpanned.

"I can just about handle my own daughter calling me Bob, but I draw a line at Bobby." He sighed. "I assume you want something?"

"Aww am I that obvious?" I smirked. "I need a ride to Nancy's. I'm probably going to stay there overnight too."

"Only if you promise me we can pick up some food for the pair of you, I don't like the idea of you going without anything tonight." He reasoned, I happily agreed.

"I think the longest campaign I made lasted 36 hours altogether, we were all so invested and we didn't want it to end." I told the boy sat on the sofa in the Wheeler residence. "I have a load that we never actually got around to doing and as I'm here and they're almost halfway across the world, I highly doubt we will be doing them any time soon." I left out the fact that we rarely finished campaigns because we'd gather round and then smoke a shit ton of weed and we were all too out of it to actually get past the first 10 minutes. Probably not the best example to set for a kid.

"I think our longest was 10 hours, it took me weeks to write." Mike responded.

"I actually brought a load with me when I moved, and since I only have two friends here and one of them is Nancy, I highly doubt I'll get the chance to use them." I said, giving him a nudge with my elbow. "Do you and your friends want a crack at them? You can either be Dungeon Master and do some adjustments to fit what pieces you have and the way you guys play, or I'd be happy to be the DM."

"Really?" He gasped in excitement. "You'd let us use your campaigns?"

"Yeah! I mean it's better than them sitting in my room collecting dust!" I grinned. Nancy returned with freshly popped popcorn. We planned to have a movie night to take our mind off things.

"Hey! Beat it!" She told her younger brother, pushing him out the way so she could sit down, despite there being plenty of room for all three of us.

"I'm talking to Aubrey!" Mike protested, with an eye roll that rivaled my own.

"Urgh go find your own friends." She scoffed, passing the bowl of popcorn over to me and flicking through the channels to find something worth watching.

"Just because you replaced your missing friend doesn't mean I have to." Mike argued, stomping off before he saw Nancy's reaction. The girl in question froze midway through putting a piece of popcorn in her mouth.

"I... Do you think I'm replacing Barb?" She asked me after a minute of silence.

"I admit that I might be biased because you're the only person who will hang out with me and I would like to continue hanging out with you, but I don't think you're replacing Barb with me." I told her with complete honesty. "From what I've heard of her, she and I are polar opposites. She is a kindhearted, sensible girl, and I was basically thrown out of my country because I was causing too many issues at home. If you were really trying to unconsciously replace her, you would have found someone a hell of a lot better than my messy ass."

"Yeah... You're right..." She gave me a small smile. "What was your life like back in the UK?" She asked, changing the subject.

"Well what do you want to know?"

"So there we were running through this giant field trying to get away from the police, all of us stripped down to our underwear and we were absolutely drenched from the lake. After like, half an hour we

thought we were in the clear and we started to slow down, which is when Felix thought it would be a good idea to push Ava into the lake. She screamed so loud that it woke up the guy who owned the nearby farm and he called the police again. So we grabbed Ava and carried on running into the forest, remember by this time we also had no shoes on, so our feet were getting absolutely destroyed. I figured, in for a penny, in for a pound, and I climbed up one of the trees and they went straight past me! I ended up falling asleep in the tree until sunrise when a bird landed on my head. I was hungover and freezing cold mess, even though it was the middle of summer- because even in summer, England is still bloody cold. I made my way back to where we left our clothes and thankfully the police hadn't taken them, so I got dressed and walked 2 miles back home. I climbed through my bedroom window and my mum and Oliver had no idea I was even gone. I met up with the others later that day and apparently Felix had been caught- which served him right for pushing Ava into the river! He was only kept in overnight though once the police realised we had done no real damage other, especially because I was the only one who was underaged and drinking and I wasn't caught." By the end of my story Nancy and I were in fits of laughter in her room, we had been shooed from the living room by her parents after only half an hour of being there.

"How are you still alive?" Nancy asked in shock, still laughing.

"I honestly have no idea! I'm either the luckiest person alive or I'm not quite as dumb as I thought!" I grinned, laying down on her bed. After a few more minutes our laughter finally died down.

"Thank you Aubrey." Nancy suddenly spoke up softly, I gave her a confused look, unsure at what she was thanking me for. "For making me feel like I'm not going crazy. I don't think I would be able to do this without you." She admitted, standing up and going over to her desk. She picked up the picture Jonathan had taken of Barb by Steve's pool. "Hey... Come here." She motioned me over. "Does that look like-"

"What we saw in the woods?" I gasped, studying the picture closer. "I mean it's not clear but it could be."

"We need to go to Jonathan about this. He was there, he might have

seen something." She said firmly before looking out the window. "Tomorrow. It's too late to go tonight."

"I haven't been here since I was a kid." I breathed, stood on the doorstep of the Byers residence. "It hasn't changed one bit." Nancy gently knocked on the door and Joyce answered. She looked between the pair of us before settling on me.

"Aubrey? I almost didn't recognise you!" She said, pulling me in for a hug which I returned. I caught a glimpse of the inside of the house to see Christmas lights scattered across the walls and lamps set up everywhere. I decided against asking.

"I missed you!" I told her as we pulled away from the hug. "Is Jonathan home?" I asked, sensing that Nancy didn't want to.

"No he's... He's at the funeral home." She whispered, though she didn't seem as upset as I would have expected. I could only assume that she was in the denial period of grief.

"Thank you Joyce, if you need anything you know where to find me." I told her, giving her one last hug before we departed.

"Thanks." Nancy said as we made our way to the funeral home. "For doing the talking, I don't know what I would have said."

"No problem, I've known Joyce basically my entire life." I told her.

"So you lived in Hawkins when you were little?" She asked.

"Yeah, until I was about 6. Then my mum had an affair with this British businessman named Oliver and whisked me away to live with them in England. They got hitched the week after my mum and Bob's divorce was finalized. I visited over the summer until I was 10, then they decided to attempt to cut contact. I still got birthday and Christmas cards from Bob, but that was it." I sighed, clutching my bag closer to me.

"That must have been rough." She said sadly, looking down at the floor.

"Eh, I got used to it. It was just how I lived." I shrugged. "I was too

young to really understand what was happening, and now that I'm old enough to understand it's not like I can go back and change the past. If I got upset over everything that happened to me that I had no way of controlling, where would I stop?"

"It looks like it could be some kind of perspective distortion, but I wasn't using the wide angle. I don't know. It's weird." Jonathan told us, studying the picture Nancy and I had taped together. We arrived at the funeral home pretty fast considering we were walking. I'd have to look into taking some driving lessons, Bob had already told me I could borrow the baby poo brown car when I was legally able to drive.

"And you're sure you didn't see anyone else out there?" Nancy asked.

"Not even like... A glimpse of what might be another person?" I joined in, hoping we could jog something in the back of his memory.

"No. And she was there one second and then, um... gone. I figured she bolted." He said.

"The cops think that she ran away. But they don't know Barb. And I went back to Steve's with Aubrey and we thought we saw something." Nancy sighed, clearly frustrated at the lack of leads and evidence to back up what we knew in our hearts to be true.

"We both saw it, it was some weird man or something..." I whispered, shuffling my feet where I sat.

"We don't know what it was." Nancy admitted, suddenly her demeanour changed completely and she stood up. "I'm sorry. I... we... shouldn't have come here today. I'm- I'm so sorry." I stood up along with her and we started to make our way out.

"What'd he look like?" Jonathan suddenly asked. We both paused and Nancy spun around.

"What?" She questioned.

"This man you guys saw in the woods. What'd he look like?" Hope bubbled deep down within me when he asked, I could tell in an instant that he believed us.

"I don't know. It was almost like..." I struggled to find the words.

"Like he... he didn't have-" Nancy tried to continue but she also couldn't find the right words.

"Didn't have a face?" Jonathan finally finished for us. Nancy and I exchanged a knowing look. He had absolutely nailed what we were collectively thinking.

"How did you know that?"

4. Chapter 3

Nancy asked so many questions at the start I had to pull out a thesaurus and find some synonyms

I didn't remember much of the car ride from the funeral home to the school where Jonathan planned to make the picture clearer so we could see exactly what it was we were looking at. The photography room was dark with a red glow, I loved it.

"And you're...?" Nancy questioned, peering over Jonathan's shoulder.

"Brightening, enlarging." He told her, she nodded with understanding. "You always did have a knack for all this stuff Jonny." I smiled, joining him on his other side and looping my arm around him in a sideways half hug.

"Did your mom say anything else?" Nancy then asked. "Like, um, where it might have gone to, or..?"

"No, just that it came out of the wall." He responded as the timer pinged. I think the fact that it can come out of walls is what scared me the most. Walls were supposed to protect you from the big nasties out in the wild.

"How long does this take?" Nancy inquired, to which Jonathan responded with 'not long'. "Have you been... doing this a while? Photography I mean?"

"When we were kids he begged and begged for a camera." I smiled, nudging him in the side.

"You and your dad actually got me my first camera for Christmas." He pointed out. We grinned at one another before he looked back at Nancy. "Yeah... I guess I'd rather observe people than... you know..."

"Talk to them?" Nancy suggested with a small smirk.

"I know, it's weird." Jonathan sighed. I shook my head at the same time Nancy said 'no'. "No, it is. It's just, sometimes people don't really say what they're really thinking. But you capture the right moment it

says more."

"What was I saying?" Nancy quizzed, causing Jonathan to give her a questioning look. "You know, when you took my picture."

"I shouldn't have taken that." He was tripping over his words. "I'm, uh I'm sorry. It's just-"

"That's it!" Nancy interrupted. "That's what we saw. Right Aubrey?" She looked at me for confirmation. I peered down closer at the picture.

"Holy shit..." I whispered. "That's it." It sent pure chills down my spine just knowing that it was real, there was photo evidence. It wasn't just a smudge on the camera or Nancy and I's paranoid minds. It was a real creature and it was out there.

"My mom... I thought she was crazy 'cause she said that's not Will's body. That he's alive." Jonathan mumbled, studying the picture closer.

"And if he's alive..." Nancy gasped.

"Then Barbra..." I finished for her.

It was getting late and Jonathan said he needed to talk to Joyce, he said he was torn on if he should tell her or not. I offered to go with him but he pointed out that I had fallen asleep on the car journey to the school, and I needed to go home and get some sleep. I didn't want to admit that I hadn't gotten much sleep due to seeing glimpses of the monster in my memories whenever I closed my eyes, but I reluctantly agreed to let him drop me off at my own home once we had dropped Nancy off at hers.

"I wish things were normal so we could catch up properly..." Jonathan told me in the car as we pulled away from Nancy's house. "I missed not having you around."

"I wanted to come back, I really did, but I wasn't allowed." I sighed, leaning my head against the window and fighting the urge to close my eyes.

"Why not?" He asked, only briefly taking his eyes off of the road to give me a glance.

"I think... I think my mum saw how much fun I had in Hawkins, how much I kicked and screamed when I had to go back to the UK." I explained. "I guess in some weird and twisted way she probably thought she was saving me the sadness of having to leave by not letting me go again, but I think it was largely for selfish reasons."

"My mom never liked yours." Jonathan admitted. "Even when we were kids I could tell that much."

"I don't think many people have ever liked my mum." I sighed, slumping down into the passenger seat of Jonathan's car. "She's always been so... Controlling. I'm pretty sure I was only born so she could trap Bob down until someone better with more money came along. That's probably why my little brother was born too."

"You have a little brother now?" Jonathan asked, I felt a pang of sadness when I remembered that his brother was missing.

"Yeah, Benjamin, dorkiest kid I know. He's so smart though, smarter than I'll ever be, and he's only ten years old." I told him. "Poor kid has so much pressure on him to succeed."

"And you were in the way of that?" He asked, but I could tell he already knew the answer.

"I became a bad influence on him apparently. I mean how could he ever win a Nobel Prize if his older sister came home past midnight? What a tragedy!" I said, my voice dripping with sarcasm, it earned a chuckle from Jonathan though. "I threatened to break the perfect family picture that my mum had built up, all because of a haircut."

"A haircut?" He questioned, but we'd already pulled up to Bob's house.

"I'll tell you about it another time." I smiled, leaning over to give him a quick hug. "You've got my number, right? Call me if you need anything." He nodded in response as I got out of the car, he waited until I had opened the front door before driving off.

"I was worried you weren't coming home." Bob joked from his seat on the sofa. "It's good to see that you've made friends already though."

"What's for dinner?" I asked, catching a whiff of something good.

"Your favourite." He grinned. "I left it in the microwave, it'll probably need a bit of reheating." I opened the microwave to find a bowl full of mashed potatoes absolutely smothered in gravy. It was the perfect comfort food.

"You remembered?" I smiled, reheating the food for a couple minutes.

"I'll even let you eat it in your room." He told me. "Just this once though!"

I woke up in a field, it looked so familiar and I realised it was the one that was just next to my friend Toby's house. I was aware that I must have been dreaming because there was physically no way I would have fallen asleep in my bed in Hawkins and woken up in a field in the UK. But somehow, it didn't feel like a dream. I'd read up about lucid dreaming fairly recently, this must have been it. I felt like I was in full control over my body, but I wasn't quite sure how much control I had of my surroundings.

I peeled myself up and brushed grass clippings from my body, I was wearing the clothes I had been in that day, I didn't remember putting my pyjamas on, or even falling asleep. But there was no other way to explain why I was where I was other than it being a dream. I figured that there was no harm in going to visit Toby in this weird dream world so I made my way to his front door and knocked on it. His mother answered, at least I assumed it was his mother, I'd never actually seen her before but this is what I would have expected her to look like.

"I assume you're here for Tobias?" She asked, I nodded with a small smile.

"Yes ma'am!" I informed her. The stern look on her face faded to a placid one as she called for her son.

"Aubrey!" Toby gasped, grabbing me and pulling me in for a hug. "You're back?" He grabbed my hand and dragged me up to his room.

"Keep the door open Tobias!" His mum called as we ran upstairs together. This was a weird dream, it felt so real.

"I can't believe you're back already!" He cheered, hugging me again once we were in his room. "We all missed you so much! Ava and Felix are actually together now so I've felt so left out with you gone."

"Really? God it always was a will they, won't they? With those two!" I grinned, flopping onto Toby's bed. It felt so real, it all felt so real. I'd never had a dream like this before and I was really starting to wonder if it was a dream.

"So how was America?" He asked, sitting down next to me. "Did your dad kick you out too?"

"No I... I don't know how I got here... I can't explain it I just woke up here?" I mumbled, Toby looked confused but listened anyway. "I was actually having fun in Hawkins? I made a friend called Nancy, she was like your picture perfect American sweetheart, really pretty, really smart, but her best friend Barb went missing so I was helping her try to track her down and- Jonathan! Oh my god my old best friend Jonathan's little brother was missing too, Will, and Nancy and I found this picture of Barb that Jonny had taken, and there was this weird monster with no face, and we-"

"Woah woah slow down Aubs!" Toby held out his hand as though he was holding me back, a grin spread across his face. "You made friends?"

"Aubrey! Come on!" I opened my eyes to a knocking at the door. "I gave you a lie in but you really need to wake up now!"

It was Bob.

I was back in Hawkins.

"I'm up!" I called back, taking in my surroundings.

"We'll be leaving in about 30 minutes." Bob told me, it took a minute to realise what we were leaving for. Will's funeral. Well, maybe. Logically, I knew they'd found Will's body. But with everything I had seen in the past week alone, I wouldn't have been surprised if he

rocked up alive to his own funeral. Hawkins was way weirder than it had been when I was last here.

"Yum, burnt toast!" I smirked, prodding the blackened bread on the kitchen table. "My favourite."

"Sorry kiddo, I was distracted." He sighed, I could tell Bob wasn't handling the idea of Will being dead very well. I gave him a small hug, which he then turned into a big hug by holding me captive.

"Okay I'd like to maybe breathe now." I squeaked out dramatically, he chuckled slightly and let go.

"Let's get going then."

I didn't know how to behave at the funeral. I'd only ever been to one before for Oliver's mum, and that miserable old bag never liked me anyway. I tried my best to look sad without over-egging it all. The service was sweet and simple, and there were lots of teary eyes. When things were over and done, people gave their condolences to the Byers family, to my dismay that included Lonnie.

"Hey, I'm gonna go talk to Jonathan and Nancy." I told Bob, who nodded and returned to talking to some Hawkins resident I didn't know. I made my way over to join the pair sat on a bench, just far enough from everyone else to not be overheard.

"This is where we know for sure it's been, right?" Jonathan motioned at the map he was holding.

"So, that's..." Nancy pointed at a section of the map.

"Steve's house. And that's the woods where they found Will's bike and that's my house." I joined the pair on the bench and peered over at the piece of paper.

"It's all so close." I noted, leaning my head on Jonathan's shoulder. Nancy looked over and gave me a small smile of acknowledgement.

"Yeah. Exactly." Jonathan said, his eyes darting across the map. "I mean, it's all within a mile or something."

"I guess whatever this thing is, it's not traveling far." I summarised, lifting my head off of his shoulder. "I mean I probably wouldn't go too far in public if I looked like that either." That earned some almost laughs from the pair, the sort of laugh where you just exhale from your nose instead of actually laughing.

"We need to go out there." Nancy firmly stated, I nodded in agreement.

"We might not find anything." Jonathan warned, looking up and peering between the pair of us.

"Aubrey and I found something." Nancy pointed out firmly. I really did admire her strength and willingness to continue on with the investigation, despite all that we had seen.

"And if we do see it again... then what?" I asked, though in my heart I already knew what the answer would be.

"We kill it." Jonathan sighed, standing up. We followed him to his car, where he slid into the passenger seat and opened up the glove compartment, rooting through it.

"What are you doing?" Nancy questioned, I was wondering the same thing.

"Just give me a second." He told us before suddenly pulling a gun out of the glove compartment.

"Bloody hell!" I breathed, having to refrain myself from raising my voice and drawing unwanted attention to our trio. We would have struggled to fathom a reason as to why Jonathan was in his car and wielding a gun at his little brother's funeral. "Do you even know how to use that thing?" I questioned, he threw me a look which seemed far more threatening than I think it was intended to be, but everything looks more threatening when you're holding a gun.

"Are you serious?" Nancy demanded, clearly not happy with the idea that he was proposing.

"What?" He asked. "You want to find this thing and take another photo? Yell at it?" I sighed and nodded in agreement.

"He has a point." I mumbled, as much as I hated the idea of hunting that thing down again, it had to be stopped before it took anyone else.

"This is a terrible idea." Nancy sighed, though I could tell she was starting to get the point.

"Yeah, well, it's the best we've got." Jonathan admitted, I nodded in agreement.

"I mean it's not like we could tell anyone, no one would believe us." I murmured, closing my eyes. "Fuck I can barely believe it and I saw it."

"Your mom would believe us Jonathan!" Nancy pointed out. "She's seen it too!"

"She's been through enough." He told her firmly, I had to agree with that. Nancy tried to argue that Joyce deserves to know, something I also agreed with.

"Yeah, and I'll tell her." Jonathan then informed us, getting out of the car. "When this thing is dead."

After the funeral I got dressed into something mildly less depressing than the black dress I'd worn to the funeral. While in my room I rooted through the suitcase that I'd shoved under my bed after unpacking the clothes, telling myself I'd unpack the rest of it another day but knowing damn well I wouldn't unpack it properly, just take things out of them as I needed them. I quickly found what I was looking for, it was the camera I'd gotten for my birthday a year or so ago, back when I was still a model student and my mum and Oliver vaguely tolerated me. I never got much use out of it, I was always more into drawing things than taking pictures of them. I shoved it into my backpack along with my lighter, a bottle of water, and cereal bars I'd packed as a snack to eat on the plane but never got around to actually eating.

"Hey Bob?" I called out, exiting my room, my backpack flung over my shoulder. "Pretty please could you give me a lift?"

"Depends how pretty that please is." He joked from the sofa. "Of

course I can kiddo, where to?"

"The Wheeler's again." I told him while he stood up to look for his keys.

"Are you going to spend the night there again?" He asked as we got into the car.

"Maybe, I'm not sure yet." I said, looking out the window. "Probably, but don't be alarmed if I do come back. I think Jonathan will be hanging out with us so he can give me a lift home if needed." He nodded and the rest of the short car ride was quiet.

I found Nancy in her garage, swinging a baseball bat around.

"Mind if I join you?" I questioned, picking up the other bat. The croquet mallets were quite tempting but I figured I'd have more control and power over a bat, plus it was far more sturdy. We swung the bats around together for a little while until Steve practically snuck up on Nancy and she almost hit him. Part of me wishes she had. Scratch that- ALL of me wishes she had.

"Whoa, whoa, hey, whoa, whoa." He looked like he was trying to calm down a wild animal, holding his arms out at Nancy who looked a mixture of shocked, embarrassed, and angry.

"What are you doing here?" She huffed, no longer holding the bat in a defensive manor and instead just letting it hang by her side.

"What are you doing?" He countered, raising an eyebrow at the sight of the bat.

"Nothing." Nancy lied, though it wasn't very convincing. I accidentally let out a little snort of laughter, causing Steve to direct his attention to me.

"What's so funny?" He demanded, clearly not happy with me. Although I could tell if it was because I was laughing, or because I had been spending more time with Nancy than he had since I arrived in Hawkins.

"Your face." I countered, I knew it was immature the moment it left

my lips. I silently kicked myself for not coming up with something whittier but it was too late now, the childish damage had been done.

"Hilarious." He rolled his eyes, his tone almost too sarcastic to be taken seriously. He turned back to look at Nancy. "I hope that's not meant for me." I had to bite my tongue to stop myself from saying something like 'if only', he already clearly didn't like me, I didn't need to go and make it worse.

"What?" Nancy asked, before suddenly realising what he meant. "No. Oh, no, I was just... thinking about joining softball." She lied, I winced at how unbelievable it was and did my best to swoop in and save her.

"I played rounders back in the UK and I was really good at it." I told him, drawing his attention off of Nancy's terrible poker face. "It's basically the same thing as softball so I was giving Nance some pointers."

"Oh... Okay that's... That's cool..." I could tell he was actually buying it, which was a good sign. He turned back to look at Nancy and talk directly to her. "Well, uh listen, I'm really sorry. I mean, even before you threatened me with a baseball bat."

"You wanna see what it's really like being threatened by a baseball bat?" I chimed in again with a smirk, he glared at me.

"Can Nancy and I have some privacy?" It was more like a demand than a question, and I was fully prepared to call him out on it, but Nancy stopped me.

"She can stay-" She started to protest, and I could tell Steve was not happy with it. I decided it was probably best to leave the two be, I was clearly not making things any better and the last thing Nancy needed was her new bitchy friend butting into her relationship.

"Nah it's okay, I'd rather not be caught in a lovers quarrel." I joked, opening the door that lead into the house. "I'll go raid your kitchen."

Once in the kitchen I climbed up onto one of the counters and started rifling through the food. I knew Nancy's parents were out so I wasn't

worried about being caught by them, but I hadn't counted on Mike being home with a little gang of kids.

"Hey Nancy-" One of the kids called out, I turned around with a cookie in my mouth and he paused, looking confused. "-You're... Not Nancy..." He pointed out as though I didn't already know that.

"Uh... Yeah I am?" I smirked, spinning my body around so I'm sat on the counter and facing them. I polished off the cookie I had started to eat. "I just got a shit ton of plastic surgery done."

"Dustin, that's Nancy's friend Aubrey." Mike explained. "She's the one who has the campaigns I told you guys about."

"Oh shit she's the *cool* one!" The boy I assume is Dustin then cheered, but he was nudged by the other boy who's name I didn't catch. They were with a girl in a wig, who seemed to stick behind Mike and keep her head down. Our eyes met quickly and I gave her a small smile which she kind of returned.

"I prefer to go by Bree the Mighty Sorceress." I joked, slipping down from the counter. I quickly noted the fact that I wasn't actually much taller than the group of kids, it wouldn't be too long until they surpassed me in height. Bob wasn't particularly tall, and Nanna Newby was even shorter than him, sadly it looked like I was taking after them as opposed to my mother's side of the family.

"I left Nancy out there with her asshole of a boyfriend, I'd better go make sure she doesn't kill him before I get the chance to." I told the kids, ruffling Mike's hair who scowled at the action and immediately got back to straighten it out. Just as I was about to open the door to the garage I turned back around to them. I could tell they had a mission, and Nancy had told me they were all really close to Will. They were smart kids and I could tell they knew something they weren't going to disclose to someone they were close with, let alone some teenage girl they just met. Chances are, if Nancy and I knew about the creature and about Will and Barb still possibly being alive, they did too. I decided to keep things vague, knowing they'd understand what I was trying to convey. "Good luck finding him."

When I entered the garage Nancy was alone again, she didn't look

like she had been crying which was a good sign.

"You managed to get rid of him then?" I asked, she nodded.

"He wanted to go catch a movie or something tonight, but I told him I wanted to be here for Mike." She explained with a shrug. "Is rounders really like softball?"

It took me a moment to realise what she was asking and why she was asking it. "Oh! I have absolutely no idea!" I admitted. "I think so? I sucked at physical education at school, we played rounders twice a week for six months and I managed to hit the ball twice- and both of those times were somehow into my own face." We laughed together for a little bit.

"You're right, you need to give me some lessons on lying at some point." She grinned once we had calmed down a bit. "So should we-"

"Aubrey?" Mike called out, opening the garage door. "Your dad is on the phone." I threw Nancy a confused look but went inside to answer the phone.

"Bob?" I asked down the phone.

"Do you have any idea why I've just had to reassure your mother that you're definitely still in Hawkins and you didn't somehow fly to and from the UK overnight to visit your friend?" He questioned. I froze.

I dreamt that I was in the UK.

At least, I thought it was a dream.

"H-How would I have done that?" I pointed out, my voice faltering slightly. He must have picked up on it because he suddenly went from being fun loving and jokey Bob to serious and stern Bob.

"Aubrey Mary Anne Newby, what are you hiding from me?" Oh shit. The full name. I figured there was no harm in lying, I HADN'T flown to the UK, it was physically impossible, and I was clearly still in Hawkins.

"I mean I had a dream about being back in England and visiting Toby

but..." I sighed. "I dunno, I read a study on shared dreams once, maybe we just had a shared dream I mean we did make a blood oath once."

"You what?" Bob questioned, but quickly decided that it wasn't worth it. "Nevermind. I told your mother that you're still in Hawkins, which you are, but when you're home you should call her to reassure her yourself. We'll talk about this more later, okay? Have fun kiddo."

"Bye Bob." I mumbled, hanging up the phone.

"Everything okay Aubrey?" Nancy asked, walking into the kitchen. I nodded.

"Yeah, yeah. Everything's fine."

5. Chapter 4

This chapter is a little shorter than the others, but it didn't take very long to write and I'm happy with where I left it off

Thank you to the people who have voted for this story and let me know that you're actually reading and enjoying this story! It really encourages me to continue writing!

Nancy and I met up with Jonathan in the forest where we had planned to regroup. He was shooting at and missing cans, I assumed his plan was to teach us how to fire a gun but he didn't seem to be particularly good at it himself.

"Hey!" Nancy called out. "Aren't you supposed to hit the cans?" She joked as we approached him.

"No, actually, you see the spaces in between the cans?" He grinned, pointing at the cans. "I'm aiming for those." I grinned at him.

"Whatever you say, hun!" I laughed, putting my rucksack down on the floor, the bat I'd taken from the Wheeler residence sticking out of it.

"Have either of you ever shot a gun before?" He asked the pair of us, Nancy shook her head.

"Have you met my parents?" She scoffed.

"I've shot a gun before." I told the pair. "Not my thing though, I didn't like it."

"You were that bad?" Jonathan joked, nudging me gently in the side.

"Hey! I was a hell of a lot better than you!" I protested. He laughed along with me but went somber quite quickly.

"I haven't shot one since I was ten." He admitted. "My dad took me hunting on my birthday. He made me kill a rabbit."

"A rabbit?" Nancy questioned, a hint of disbelief in her voice.

"Yeah. I guess he thought it would make me into more of a man or something." He sighed. "I cried for a week."

"I remember that." I gave him a small, sad smile.

"Jesus." Nancy breathed, shaking her head softly.

"What? I'm a fan of Thumper." Jonathan said defensively. I gave his arm a little squeeze of encouragement.

"I meant your dad." Nancy explained.

"I've always hated Lonnie." I admitted. "Apparently when I was a baby I would scream and cry if he ever tried to hold me."

"Yeah but you cried a lot as a baby" Jonathan pointed out. "You were always sick and in and out of hospitals."

"Urgh don't remind me." I sighed, thinking back to the occasional nightmare I still had of being held down while men in white coats jabbed me with needles. "I have no idea what they were doing to me but I guess it worked, I mean I'm not sick anymore." I shrugged. "At least Joyce saw some sense and left Lonnie." I said, changing the subject.

"I guess my dad and my mother loved each other at some point, but..." He cocked the gun. "I wasn't around for that part." Nancy motioned to the gun and held her hand out, so he handed it over to her. "Just, uh, point and shoot." He explained to her.

"I don't think my parents ever loved each other." She told us.

"They must have gotten married for some reason." Jonathan pointed out.

"My mom was young. My dad was older, but he had a cushy job, money, came from a good family." Nancy said while aiming the gun. "So they bought a nice house at the end of the cul-de-sac and started their nuclear family."

"Screw that." Jonathan whispered.

"Yeah. Screw that." She said before firing the gun and hitting a can on the first try, I let out a little whoop. "How about you Aubrey?"

"Hmm?" I gave her a confused look as she handed the gun over.

"Do you think your mom and dad ever loved one another?" She asked as I aimed the gun. I let out a snort of laughter.

I think Bob loved my mum, but she's incapable of loving anyone but herself." I said before shooting and hitting a can. "Sylvia Waters is your textbook narcissist. She lives in her own perfect little world, and anything that doesn't fit that perfect little world needs to be gotten rid of." I shot another can. "Bob didn't fit in her perfect little world because he didn't earn enough money. Hawkins didn't fit in her perfect little world because it was too small." I shot the forth can. "Aubrey didn't fit in her world because she dared to think for herself and become her own person." With that, I shot the fifth and final can.

After a couple more practice rounds with the gun, we all decided Nancy should take it. At first she tried to insist that I'd be better with it, but I shook my head and told her I was more comfortable with the bat. It was true, I liked being able to physically feel what I was doing, I felt like I had more control with the bat. We decided to take a wander through the forest near Jonathan's house in the general area where we assumed the monster was active. We'd walked pretty much in silence for the most of it, but it was a comfortable silence. That was until Nancy decided to question Jonathan some more.

"You never said what I was saying." She pointed out, the both of us were confused but I could tell it wasn't aimed at me so I chose to keep out of it.

"What?" Jonathan asked, wanting her to elaborate some more.

"Yesterday." She told him. "You said I was saying something and that's why you took my picture."

"Oh, uh... I don't know... My guess..." He stumbled over his words, trying to pick the right ones to express what he thought. "I saw this girl, you know, trying to be someone else. But for that moment.... it was like you were alone, or you thought you were. And, you know,

you could just be yourself." There was a small silence.

"That is such bullshit." Nancy stated.

Jonathan paused and stood still for a second. "What?"

"I am not trying to be someone else. Just because I'm dating Steve and you don't like him-" She started to explain, but he cut her off.

"You know what? Forget it." He said, walking off ahead. I stuck behind the pair a little, not wanting to get involved. "I just thought it was a good picture."

"He's actually a good guy." She called out, chasing after him a little more. I tried to catch up some more but I got distracted by a sound in the woods. I couldn't see anything so I brushed it off as just being a bird or a deer.

"Okay." Jonathan said, clearly wanting the argument to be over with, but Nancy didn't want to drop it.

"Yesterday, with the camera..." She sighed "He's not like that at all. He was just being protective." I rolled my eyes at that. Steve was your textbook asshole, there was no way around it.

"Yeah, that's one word for it." Jonathan huffed, continuing to walk ahead of us.

"Oh, and I guess what you did was okay?" Nancy accused.

"No, I..." He sighed. "I never said that."

"He had every right to be pissed-" She started to argue but Jonathan interrupted her again.

"Okay, all right." He said. I heard the noise again, I saw something in the corner of my eye from the direction it came from. "Does that mean I have to like him?"

"Uh... Guys?" I tried to catch their attention, but they were too engrossed in their argument.

"Listen, don't take it so personally, okay? I don't like most people. He's in the vast majority." Jonathan protested.

"Guys?" I tried again, but I was once more ignored.

"You know, I was actually starting to think that you were okay." Nancy told Jonathan.

"Yeah?" He shook his head at her.

"Yeah!" She said, glaring at him. I tried one final time to grab their attention.

"Guys? I heard something!" But as before, I was ignored. I heard the noise again, coming from the same direction as before. It came from behind us and to the right. Sighing, I began walking away from the pair, just about catching what I hoped was the end of their argument.

"Yeah, I was thinking, 'Jonathan Byers, maybe he's not the pretentious creep everyone says he is.'" Nancy criticised.

"Well, I was just starting to think you were okay. I was thinking, 'Nancy Wheeler, she's not just another suburban girl who thinks she's rebelling by doing exactly what every other suburban girl does until that phase passes and they marry some boring one-time jock who now works sales, and they live out a perfectly boring little life at the end of a cul-de-sac.

Exactly like their parents, who they thought were so depressing, but now, hey, they get it.'" Jonathan barked back. It was the last I heard from the pair as they disappeared off into the distance, clearly not noticing that I was no longer with them.

I heard the noise again, it was getting louder. It sounded like a growl grossed with someone gargling mouthwash or salt water, it made my skin crawl. Every logical part of my body told me to run, it told me to turn around and go back to Nancy and Jonathan, despite their bickering. But I didn't. I kept walking on. I kept walking towards the noise.

It got more and more consistent until it was one long continuous sound as opposed to just small gurgles. Soon I located a tree that had

a hole in the trunk, it looked like it was pulsing. It looked like it was alive.

"What the fuck?" I whispered, leaning in closer to inspect it. As I did so, something darted out and grabbed me by the neck, pulling me in.

I couldn't breathe and my vision was starting to go hazy. I struggled against the vine that held me captive by the throat, digging my fingernails into it. I silently cursed myself for chewing my nails to death, they were just little nubs and hardly made a scratch in the vine. If I got out of this shit alive, I vowed to stop biting my nails.

As I was starting to lose consciousness, the vines dropped me on the floor, which was wet and sticky. It wasn't natural. It wasn't right. I desperately stood up, trying my best not to slip over, and ran. I didn't know where I was running, I just knew I had to get away from the tentacle vine things, but they were everywhere. I kept running and running, until my legs gave in and I collapsed on the floor, leant against a tree. I wanted to scream and I wanted to cry but I didn't have the energy to do either. I didn't have the energy to do anything, I couldn't even stand up. I let my eyes close and the darkness consume me.

I didn't know how long I had been out for, but I could hear Nancy and Jonathan calling my name. I peeled my eyes open and ripped off the small vines that had started to grow around my limbs. Somehow, I managed to stand up, my legs shook but I managed it. One of my shoes was missing, I assumed it had been lost when I was running, but I didn't know and right now it really didn't matter.

"Aubrey!" I heard Nancy call out. She sounded close by.

"Nancy!" I screamed back, looking around to try and find her.

"Aubrey!" She called again, I found the direction her voice came from and saw a blinking light. I ran as fast as I could towards the light, but froze when I saw the creature. It was eating- no. It was devouring a deer. It was like it had never eaten before, it fed off of the creature like it was it's first and last meal. I looked up and saw Nancy stood on the other side of the monster. Scanning the surroundings showed that there was almost no way I could get to her without alerting the

monster. I shook my head.

"Run." I mouthed at Nancy, she shook her head, eyes full of tears. I nodded at her, encouraging her to run. I took a step back and winced as something below me snapped. The monster looked up at me, its face opening in a gut wrenching screech. In the corner of my eye I saw Nancy run away. Before I could think things through, I started running again, the monster hot on my heels. I screamed as it lunged at me, but ducked behind one of the trees. I ran once more, hiding behind trees where I could. My heart was racing, but I felt like I'd lost the monster.

I ducked behind another tree and bit back a scream when I ran into Nancy. She grabbed me and held me close, burying her face into the crook of my neck. I could feel her physically shaking.

"I know, I know." I whispered, pulling myself together the best I could to be strong for her. She needed someone to lean on who wouldn't crumble below her. In the distance I heard Jonathan calling our names, he sounded close but far away at the same time, his voice echoing around us. I grabbed Nancy's hand and together we ran, calling Jonathan's name as we went.

"Follow my voice!" He yelled, and we did the best we could to do exactly that. "Just follow my voice! Aubrey! Nancy! I'm right here! Follow my voice!" But the monster found us again before we found Jonathan. I pulled Nancy behind another tree and covered her with my own body. Thankfully the monster didn't see us so I didn't have to use my body as a human shield. Not yet at least. The monster was still lurking around, still trying to find us, so I scanned the ground. When I couldn't find anything I took off my other shoe, I'd already lost one so I wouldn't miss the other. I threw the shoe in the opposite direction to where we were headed towards Jonathan's voice. It landed on the floor a fair distance away with a disgusting squelch. The monster ran in that direction, trying to hunt down my shoe.

It fell for it.

It actually fell for it.

We ran once more towards Jonathan's voice until Nancy froze. She pointed at a tree, I recognised it as the hole I'd found before, and we

could hear Jonathan's voice calling us and it sounded like it was coming from the hole. I motioned for Nancy to crawl through the hole first, it looked like it was closing around her and I felt a stab of fear that I'd be trapped her. I had to push it from my mind and make sure that if I wasn't going to make it at least Nancy would. I helped push her through, but in the last second she reached down and grabbed my hand, pulling me out too. Jonathan was on the other side, dragging me out completely once Nancy was out and safe. I gasped out the fresh air and laid on the floor as Jonathan and Nancy hugged one another, both of them crying their eyes out. Looking over I spotted something lying next to my head. It took a moment to realise what it was but it finally clicked. It was my shoe. I couldn't help but let out a choke of laughter. The pair looked over at me in confusion as I picked my shoe up.

"I'm only responding to Cinderella from now on." I told them, my voice hoarse. And though they had tears in their eyes and they were clutching on to one another for dear life, they laughed too.

6. Chapter 5

my bisexual ass is screaming at me to make Aubrey and Nancy be together but this is an Aubrey and Steve story (this is the slowest burn story I've ever written I swear)

"I want to go home." I whispered it so quietly that I almost didn't hear myself, but Nancy did. She whipped her head back to look at me in the backseat of Jonathan's car.

"Aubrey..." She gave me a pleading look. "If it's okay I... I want us to stay together..." I closed my eyes and nodded, sinking back into the seat of the car. What she didn't know is that I didn't mean I wanted to go back to Bob's house, I wanted to be back in the UK. I wanted to be as far away from that thing and that place as I possibly could. I wanted to be in my crappy little room with the plastered over hole in the wall from the time I tried to redo the bathroom and ripped the toilet roll holder and took out a whole chunk of the wall separating the bathroom from my bedroom with it. I wanted to be in my crappy little room that had a ziplock bag of tea bags that I had for some reason pinned to the wonky corkboard I put up myself because I was tired of begging Oliver to do it for me. I wanted to be in my crappy little room that had a purple nail varnish stain on the carpet from the sleepover I had on my 12th birthday when my old friends and were on a sugar high from all the sweets we'd smuggled in and we were discussing plans on how to convince the boys in our class to ask us out, when the most terrifying thing was the idea that a tween boy wouldn't ask us to the school disco and not that there was a flesh eating demonic monster snatching people up.

No one else was awake in Nancy's house, so we weren't concerned that Jonathan would be caught by her parents while he was sneaking into her room late at night. I went to sit on Nancy's bed but then realised the state I was in. My clothes were ripped, I was caked in mud and some weird goo, and I was damp. I had apologised to Jonathan when I got out of his car because I'd made his back seat absolutely filthy, but he had just waved it off and told me that he needed to have a good cleanout of his car anyway.

"Aubrey, do you want to go shower first? You can borrow some of my

clothes." Nancy told me, opening one of her drawers and taking out some pyjamas and handing them to me. "There should be fresh towels under the sink." I thanked her quietly and made my way to the bathroom.

Once in the shower, I took a deep breath and looked down at my body. I choked out a small sob when I saw that my body was absolutely covered in bruises and little cuts. I looked like I had been in some sort of car crash. How the hell would I explain this to anyone who saw me? The bruises were in lines that traced exactly where the vine/tentacles had held me captive. My stomach churned and I felt acid rise in my throat, I threw myself out of the shower and at the toilet where the contents of my stomach were released.

Trying not to cry, I stood back up and looked at myself in the mirror. There were dark circles under my eyes, but other than that, my neck and above were bruise free. Provided I was able to wear long sleeved jumpers and jeans or something, I could let the bruises heal without being seen by Bob or anyone else.

I got back into the shower to finish washing what I could off of my body and out of my hair. When I was as satisfied as I could possibly be in my current state, I got out and dried myself off before getting dressed. I wiped the water off of the floor and hung the towel up on the radiator to dry off.

Taking another deep breath, I exited the bathroom and returned to Nancy's room. I could have sworn I saw something moving in the window, but I tried to push it out of my mind, thinking it to just be a figment of my paranoid imagination.

Once she saw me, Nancy stood up and whispered that she was going to go shower next, I thanked her quickly and quietly for letting me go first and she gave me a soft, but sad smile. Jonathan was sat on her bed, looking up at me.

"What's on your mind?" He asked, his voice was gentle as though I would break at any moment. Slowly, I pulled one of the sleeves up and Jonathan gasped at the sight of my bruises. "Holy... Aubrey..."

"How am I supposed to explain this?" I asked, sitting down next to

him. He put an arm around my waist, I winced slightly at the pain but leant my head on his shoulder nonetheless. "I'm sorry."

"You're sorry? What for?" He questioned me, I hated feeling so vulnerable around others, but I had to suck in my pride and deal with the fact that yes, I have emotions.

"If I hadn't walked off we wouldn't... we wouldn't be in this situation. Nancy wouldn't have gone in that... that place..." I struggled to get my words out.

"It's not your fault Aubrey, it's really not." He reassured me, hugging me closer. I let out a small hiss of pain and he let me go. "Where else do you have bruises?"

"Everywhere." I told him, pulling one of the pyjama legs up. I hadn't shaved my legs in days because I was too preoccupied, but Jonathan and I used to take baths together and run around the garden completely naked, so I wasn't particularly worried. He pulled my leg up onto his lap and studied the bruises closely, I shifted uncomfortably. He looked up at me again and gave me the smallest grin, stroking my leg.

"Fluffy." It was only one word but it made me laugh and forget what had happened for a moment. "There she is!" He chuckled along with me. I pulled my leg away from him and laid back on Nancy's bed.

"You're a loser." I told him, smiling.

"Yeah, but so are you." He pointed out while nodding in agreement. "Do you happen to know if Nancy has any spare sheets or anything?"

"Oh! Yeah yeah, in her closet." I told him, standing up to go and get them. "She let me use it when we were watching a movie downstairs the other night."

"You always have been good at making friends." Jonathan said, taking the sheets from me and laying them out on the floor. "I remember I was so jealous when we were kids because you had so many friends, and everyone wanted to talk to you. But you always made sure I was your top priority. You would refuse to play with

anyone if they didn't want me there too."

"Remember when we got 'married'? We were what? Seven? We made invites and everything! No one showed up but we went ahead with it anyway."

"We high fived to seal the deal instead of kissing because kissing was gross. But then we decided we didn't want to be married anymore so we got divorced."

"We fought over who would get custody of Gerry the Teddy!" I gasped. "I did of course! I still have him."

"Really?"

"Yeah! He's sat on my bed right now!"

"How is he doing?"

"He's currently missing most of his stuffing but I kept what came out and I made a baby out of it!"

"We're grandparents!"

"Yes!" The pair of us laughed, shushing one another if we started to get too loud. Every time we would calm down, we would just look at one another and laugh all over again.

It wasn't too long until Nancy came back from her shower. I automatically got up and gave her a hug. Though I had always made friends easily, I felt like Nancy was different. I was so protective over her already, and it had only been what? A week? In some ways she reminded me of myself back when I was still with Joshua, and I wanted to save her from the same heartbreak I experience. It was probably one of the main reasons I didn't like Steve. That and he was just a bit (or a lot) of a dick anyway.

"Better?" Jonathan asked her. She nodded softly as we pulled away from our hug. "Is this okay? Uh, Aubrey got it out of the closet for me... I can go home? I just figured..."

"Yeah, no. I-" She stuttered over her words. "I don't wanna be

alone..."

"Me neither..." He admitted. Nancy laid down in her bed and I laid down next to her. Under the covers she clutched my hand, I assumed as a reassurance that she wasn't alone.

"Are you okay Aubrey?" She whispered, looking at me with her wide eyes. I couldn't lie to her but I didn't want to worry her, so I took the coward's way out.

"I don't really want to talk about it." I told her, she nodded in understanding, but I could see the worry behind her all laid in silence for a moment, none of us actually closing our eyes to go to sleep.

Eventually, Nancy spoke up. "Jonathan? Can you just... come up here?" I shuffled closer to Nancy to make room for him, thankful that she had spoken up about it.

"Do you want the lights off, or-" He asked as he laid down on my other side. He was on top of the covers but I decided not to say anything.

"On." Nancy said firmly and quickly. I nodded in agreement. We all had another moment of silence as we lay there with our eyes open, too scared to go to sleep.

"You know, it... it can't get us in here." Jonathan tried to reassure us.

"We don't know that." Nancy whispered. I unintentionally gripped her hand harder, and she squeezed it back.

Somehow, Jonathan managed to fall asleep, then Nancy. I stayed awake. Every single time I closed my eyes, I felt like I was back there. Whenever the covers moved they felt like the vines sliding across my body. Eventually I managed to scrape an hour or so of sleep, but it wasn't long until I felt Nancy move next to me.

"Sorry, did I wake you?" She whispered, concern in her voice.

"No, no. I was already awake." I told her as she stood up. "You look like you have a mission."

"Do you want to help me see if we can find anything like that..."

Thing in a book somewhere?" She asked, I nodded and stood up along with her. I knew we wouldn't be able to find it, or anything like it, in the books. But despite that, I agreed to help out.

We spent about half an hour before Jonathan woke up. He looked around for a minute, not knowing where he was, it was adorable.

"Oh..." He mumbled, sitting up and finally remembering what had happened. "Hey."

"Hey." Nancy replied, still flicking through the pages of the book she was on.

"Mornin' sleepyhead." I smiled, leaning over and ruffling his hair. He shook me off and tried to straighten his hair back out, though where he had slept it was already sticking in random directions.

"Couldn't sleep?" He asked the pair of us. I looked down into my lap and let Nancy respond.

"Every time I close my eyes, I just keep seeing that thing." She sighed, I gave a slight nod in agreement but decided not to speak up myself. "Wherever Aubrey and I were, that place... I think that it lives there. It was feeding there. Feeding on that deer. That means that if... if Will and Barbara" She was choking on her words but Jonathan interrupted her.

"Hey. My mom said she talked to Will. If he's alive, there's a chance Barbara is, too." He said firmly, I wanted to believe him, I really did.

"That means that she's trapped in that place." Nancy pointed out, I sucked in a deep breath to steady my voice before I finally spoke up.

"I was for a while too... I don't know how long, but I was there and I..." I could feel my voice starting to shake as I spoke. "I lost fainted or something, but I survived. It didn't feed off of me."

"We have to find it again." Nancy suddenly decided, determination in her eyes.

"You wanna go back out there?" Jonathan asked in disbelief. I had to agree with him. I didn't want to go anywhere near that place again, I

didn't want to even THINK about that place again.

"Maybe we don't have to." Nancy said, I fought back a sigh of relief. "When I saw it, it was feeding on that deer. Meaning it's- it's a predator, right?"

"Right." I confirmed, it was basically one of the only things we knew about the creature. It was a predator, and it was fucking terrifying.

"And it seems to hunt at night, like a- a lion or a coyote. But it doesn't hunt in packs like them. It's always alone, like-" Nancy struggled to pull an animal from her mind that hunted solo.

"Like a bear?" I offered.

"Exactly! And remember at Steve's, when Barb cut herself? And then, last night, the deer!" I could see the thoughts forming in Nancy's mind. I wasn't there when they saw the deer before the monster got to it, so I assumed she was talking more to Jonathan than me.

"It was bleeding, too." He nodded, catching on.

"One sec." She told us, standing up to go through one of the books she had set to the side. She settled on a page and started reading from it. "Sharks can detect blood in one part per million."

"That's one drop of blood in a million, and they can smell it from a quarter mile away." I clarified, having read something very similar in another book I had flicked through.

"So you're saying it can detect blood?" Jonathan asked, studying the book Nancy held.

"It's just a theory." Nancy said, frowning down at the page.

"We could... test it?" Jonathan suggested, I unintentionally shuddered at the thought. He noticed this and gently put his hand on my arm to comfort me. I gave him a small, thankful smile, but I silently cursed myself for letting my discomfort show. "But if it works..."

"At least we'll know it's coming." I said firmly, trying to seem stronger than I knew I felt. "We can be prepared." My confident facade

crumbled when the door rattled. The three of us jumped in unison, one of Jonathan's hands gripped Nancy's and the other clutched my arm harder. I winced as he was squeezing my bruises and upon seeing this he quickly loosened his grip.

"Honey, are you up?" Mrs Wheeler asked from the other side of the door. We all collectively let out a silent sigh of relief knowing it was just Nancy's mother and not the monster. Though I highly doubted the monster would be nice enough to use the door.

"Yeah, I'm- I'm getting dressed!" Nancy stuttered out, still as bad at lying as she had been every other time I heard her attempt it.

"I, uh, made some blueberry pancakes." Mrs Wheeler explained, I could tell by her voice that she knew Nancy was lying, but thankfully she didn't question it.

"Aubrey stayed over last night, is there enough for her?" Nancy asked, probably hoping the answer was 'no' so we could easily skip breakfast with the Wheeler family.

"Uh, I'm sure there will be!" Mrs Wheeler called back, Nancy rolled her eyes at this.

"We'll be down in a minute." She told her mother. Thankfully we heard steps leading away from the door and we all let out another sigh of relief, Jonathan quickly letting go of Nancy's hand with a sheepish look. I widened my eyes at what other people might have seen as a small action, but despite having been separated for years, I knew my Johnny. He had a crush on Nancy and it was adorable.

"Your mom doesn't knock?" He asked Nancy with a smile, we all chuckled softly.

"Nance, could I borrow some clothes please?" I asked the other girl, who nodded and grabbed a jumper and some jeans that would fit me. I was a little heavier, more shapely, and shorter than Nancy, but she had some items of clothing she claimed were from an Aunt who clearly didn't know her size. They fit fairly well, though I had to bunch the jeans up at the ankles. Most of my jeans I had tailored myself to fit my unnaturally short stature, though I did find that a lot of jeans marketed as being 'cropped' fit my legs almost perfectly.

"I'll sneak out of the window and get my car from down the road while you two get dressed." Jonathan told us, I nodded and watched him climb through the window, trying not to laugh at how awkward he looked.

Once Nancy and I were dressed we agreed to avoid breakfast by sneaking out of the same window as Jonathan. Before we left I stuck some music on, I had a fair bit of experience when it came to sneaking out of a house and music normally gave you a fraction of extra time to get away. It covered the noise you may make while climbing out of the window, and your family won't be concerned at how quiet you're being in your room or wonder why the hell you've locked yourself in there in complete silence.

"Took you long enough." Jonathan joked as we clambered into his car. It looked like he had cleaned off the backseat to the best of his abilities so I wasn't as concerned at getting Nancy's clothes dirtier than needed.

"We could always go back and do our makeup too." I told him, poking my tongue out childishly. He laughed and started up the car.

"So where are we going?" He questioned, Nancy looked like she was about to say something but then shrugged.

"Any idea if that camping and hunting supply shop is still in business?" I asked Jonathan who paused for a moment before nodding.

"Yeah, yeah. I think it's still downtown." He said. "So what? We get hunting supplies?"

"Exactly!" I smiled, trying to hide how nervous I was about the whole situation.

"It's our best bet." Nancy agreed.

"Bear traps here we come!" I grinned.

We were about to enter the shop to get supplies when I spotted RadioShack across the road.

"Hey, I'm gonna go stop in with Bob." I told Nancy and Jonathan, who nodded. "Make sure you pick up some bear traps!"

"Bear traps?" Nancy looked at me like I was crazy but I just grinned.

"Just trust me!" I called out as I crossed the road to get to RadioShack. Bob looked up when I entered and smiled at me.

"Well hello stranger!" He joked, I gave him a small frown.

"I'm sorry I've been out so much..." I mumbled, flicking through some records to avoid eye contact. Stopping by to say hi to Bob had been a nice thought but it was kind of a mess in practice when I realised I didn't have much I could say to him.

"No! It's okay! It's good to see that you've made friends so soon." He told me. "And honestly you could have made worse friends. You picked a couple of good ones there."

"Yeah..." I nodded. "I know I did." Though I didn't really 'pick' Nancy and Jonathan.

"Could you do me a favour though?" Bob asked, I hesitantly nodded, worried I'd have to stick around and make Nancy and Jonathan wait. "Call your mother."

Scratch making Nancy and Jonathan wait. This was worse. This was way worse.

"But-" I started to protest but he cut me off.

"No buts! Your mother has been calling me like crazy. She's convinced that you're not in Hawkins anymore." He sighed, pointing at the phone attached to the wall. I was going to argue that I shouldn't use the RadioShack phone to make overseas calls but I remembered that he's the manager, he can do whatever the hell he wants. Reluctantly, I picked up the phone and dialed the number I knew by heart.

"Hello?" The devil bitch herself answered, feigning innocence.

"Hello mother." I sighed, already dreading the wave of bullshit that

was about to wash over me.

"Aubrey Barkridge!" She yelled down the phone, causing me to pull it away from my ear slightly. "Explain to me why you were seen at home the other night!"

"What is there to explain? I wasn't there and that's that." I rolled my eyes, though I knew she wouldn't be able to see it. "Could you please be logical for once in your life?" As I said that, Nancy and Jonathan walked into the shop. I gave them a short nod of acknowledgement as my mother screeched like a banshee down the phone.

"Even your friend's mother is convinced you were in her house! Do you know how embarrassing this is for me?" She screamed, I was livid.

"Embarrassing for you? *Embarrassing for you?* How the hell does this affect you in any shape or form? I am clearly not in England. I was not in England. They were just mistaken. First off, how the fuck do you think I would have had the money to fly there? Secondly-

"Aubrey don't swear at your mother." Bob interrupted sternly. A look of realisation passed Jonathan and Nancy's faces.

"I'll swear at the bitch all I want." I retorted, making sure said bitch heard me. "Secondly, how would I have found the time to fly two and from Indiana and the England overnight? Thirdly, why the hell would I go to England, see only one of my friends, and then go back to Hawkins? What is the fucking point of that?"

"Aubrey!" My mother yelled in one ear.

"Aubrey Newby!" Bob yelled in the other. "You will apologise to your mother right now!"

"Like hell I will!" I scoffed.

"Aubrey!" My mother yelled through the phone again.

"What?" I snapped back at her.

"Aubrey!" Bob piped up again.

"Hold on Bob!" I told him, holding my hand out.

"Apologise to me!" My mother demanded.

"I have nothing to apologise for because I didn't do anything!" I protested, fully aware that everyone in the shop was staring at me. "I was in Hawkins! I have been since you decided that you couldn't be arsed to put up with your own daughter anymore and shipped her off to live halfway across the world!"

"You know that-" She started, but I interrupted her, not wanting to hear any excuses.

"No! I don't know anything apparently! Tell Benjamin I love him, tell Oliver he needs to get his head out of your arse, and tell yourself to get fucked." With that I slammed the phone down.

The shop was silent for a moment, Nancy and Jonathan stared at me with wide eyes, the customers were trying to return to their shopping but snuck glances up to see what would happen next.

And then there was Bob, looking more angry than I thought he was ever capable of.

"You're grounded." He told me. I knew I should have just nodded and accepted it, but I had already started digging the hole and I couldn't drop the shovel.

"What? You told me to call her so I called her, and now I'm grounded for calling her? That's bullshit!" I fumed, crossing my arms and shaking my head.

"That's not why you're grounded and you know it." He said.

"Whatever." I sighed, storming out of the shop, knowing damn well he couldn't just up and leave his job to follow me. Thankfully Nancy and Jonathan got the hint and followed suit. Bob continued to call out my name as we walked away but I ignored him. That was a problem for future Aubrey, right now we had bigger and literal monsters to fight.

"That... That was intense." Jonathan broke the silence, throwing me a small and awkward smile. Before I got the chance to respond and change the subject, someone pulled up to the sidewalk, honking their

horn.

"Hey, Nance!" The driver, a boy around our age, jeered. "Can't wait to see your movie." He sped off again, laughing as he went.

"What the hell was that?" I asked, looking to Nancy for answers, but she just shrugged.

"I don't know." She responded, turning around and looking off at something in the distance. She suddenly took off without warning, running down the street.

"Where are you going?" Jonathan called out to her before looking at me. I shrugged and started running after her, he quickly joined me.

"Nancy!" I called out, I could see her but I couldn't quite catch up.

"Wait!" Jonathan shouted out. She didn't wait until we crossed a road. Nancy looked distraught, so I followed her line of vision.

On the front of the movie theatre underneath 'ALL THE RIGHT MOVES' someone had spray painted 'STARRING NANCY THE SLUT WHEELER'.

"Jesus..." Jonathan mumbled under his breath. I shook my head, anger bubbling up inside me once again.

"Whoever did this is going to pay." I told Nancy, linking my hand with hers to give her what little moral support I could provide.

"Mark my fucking words. They. Will. Pay."